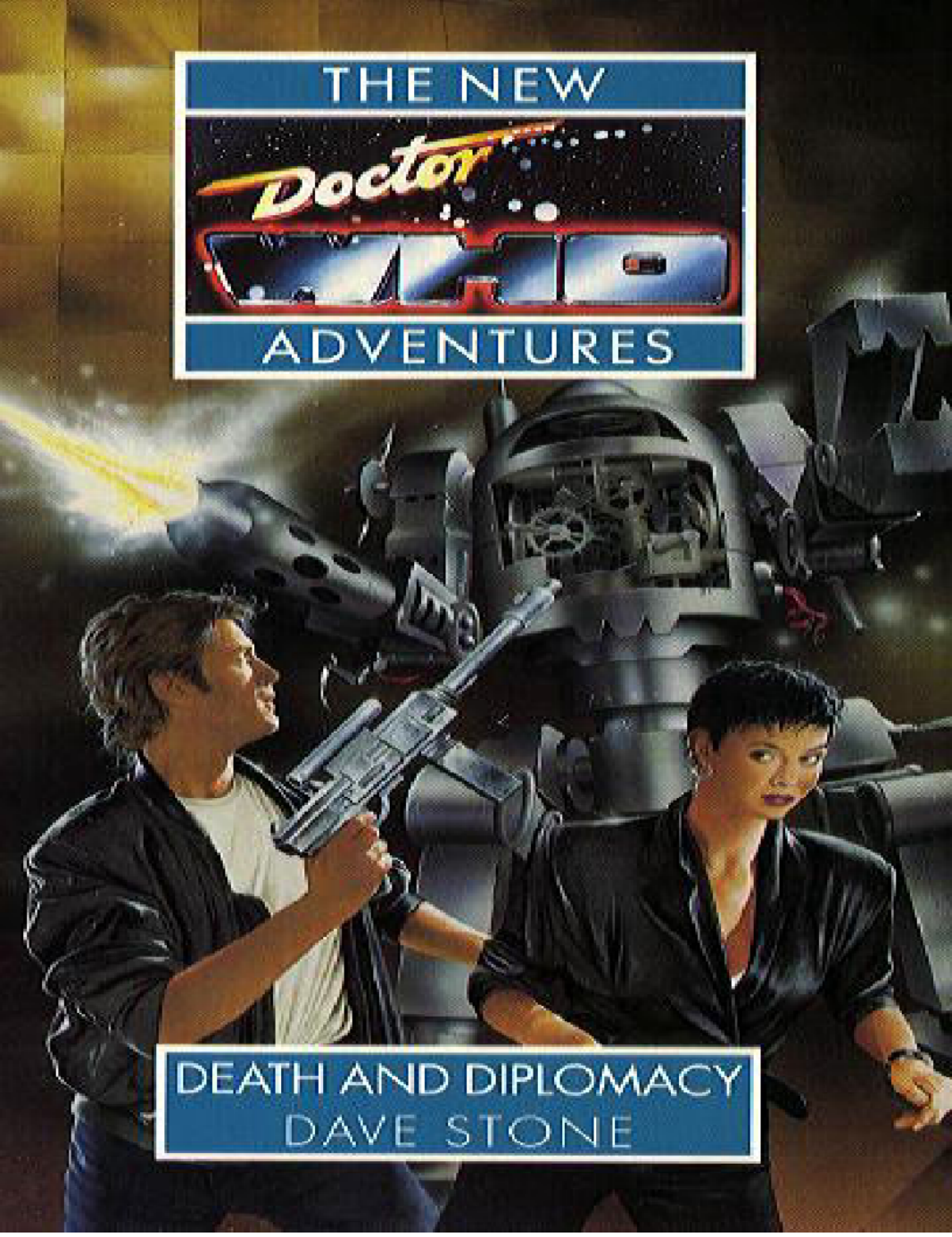
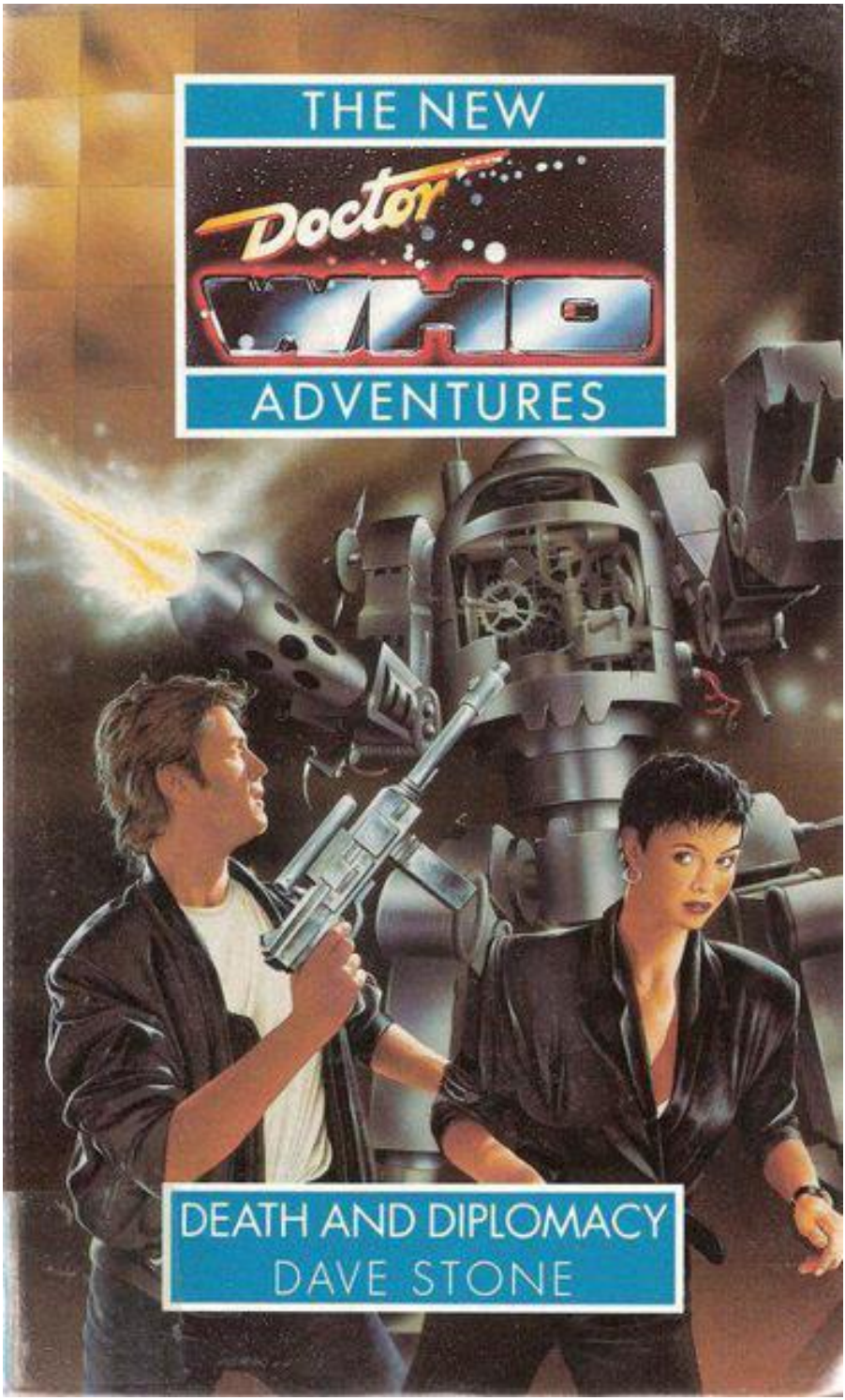

THE NEW
Doctor WHO
ADVENTURES
DEATH AND DIPLOMACY
DAVE STONE



Three mighty empires poised for war!

In the far-off Magellan Cluster, the savage Dakhari, the militaristic Czhans and the evil backstabbing Salai are at each other's respective throats over the tiny, peaceful planet of Moriel. The Hollow Gods have decreed that a satellite be built in which they must settle their differences or else. But just who has the tact and diplomacy to arbitrate these talks?

Meanwhile, Roz and Chris are on Moriel with the Czhanist army, knocking seven hells out of the native populace. Why have they launched this sneak attack? Will it wreck the talks completely? Are they participating in the Hollow Gods' hidden agenda – a plan that will result in the death of billions?

And while the others are otherwise occupied, Benny is stranded, lost and alone, facing the most terrifying challenge of her life – someone who will haunt her for the rest of her days. He's called Jason.

Full-length original novels based on the longest running science-fiction television series of all time, the BBC's **Doctor Who**. The New Adventures take the TARDIS into previously unexplored realms of space and time.

Dave Stone is the author of three **Judge Dredd** novels and the Doctor Who New Adventure **Sky Pirates!** Obviously the medication was ineffective.

DEATH AND DIPLOMACY

Dave Stone

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London W10 5AH

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Author's Note

Aside – as will hopefully become clear – from being a companion and a coun-terpoint to Paul Cornell's marvellous and forthcoming Happy

Endings, this is the second book in a trilogy. The third, if we're all spared, will appear later in the New Adventures. For some reason. At some point.

One of the functions of a trilogy is to take the same basic package of images, tropes and themes and examine them in a variable light, bringing out new aspects and emphases each time; telling what appears to be superficially a different story while remaining inextricably and recursively linked to what has gone before and what will follow. For some the links might be a simple continuation of character and plot, for others a development of ideas. What I tell you three times is true.

A trilogy consists of generation, exploration and summation.

Sky Pirates! was about constructivity and was a joke-book – gags being the low form of tragicomedy but the highest tragicomic form of which this writer is capable.

Death and Diplomacy is about structurality and is a comedy – which is an entirely different thing from gags. A comedy doesn't have to be funny, for one thing. The Tempest – whatever else it does – brings us agonizingly face-to-face with mortality and loss, so close that it scores our souls. Titus Andronicus – a tragedy – is a hoot.

The putative third book will be about deconstruction, closure and death.

The title of this book on the other hand, Death and Diplomacy, is in the nature of a clue. Watch out for the ghost of Austen among others dancing through it like an insane ballerina on amphetamines.

I just wanted to point all that out – certain people having invariably failed to pick up on every back-reference I've ever made, even when they've been explicitly signposted, which strikes me as just wilful. I think it was Jules Feiffer who said that, while genius can paint the sky any colour it likes, the rest of us have to colour it in blue because otherwise people might think we're stupid.

Then again, it was either Adolph Hitler or Ronald Reagan who said that anyone who paints the sky green should be sterilized immediately.

D.S.

For the Memory of 'Susan'.

Nelle ultime settimane l'affetto che mi lega ate e cresciuto piu quanto io possa sopportare e, se devo dirti la verita, sento che si sta trasformando in amore –

un sentimento che mi lascerebbe in una solitudine disperata e che farebbe cadere la mia maschera. Forse la colpa e della mia paura di legarmi a qualcuno, di lasciarmi andare e innamorarmi. Devo conservare la mia liberta per raggiungere gli obiettivi che ho davanti a me. Permettimi di condividere una straordinaria amitizia con te.

Non dimentichero mai la luce che, filtrando attraverso la vetrata, tingeva la tua schiena di rifiessi blu, il colore degli iris schiaaiati.

Von Neuman's Catastrophe, or more fully Von Neuman's catastrophe of the infinite regress, demonstrates that quantum mechanics entails an infinite regression of measurements. Any measuring device is a quantum system in itself containing uncertainty, and thus requires a second measuring device with which to monitor it. And the second measuring device is in itself a quantum system containing uncertainty, and thus requires a third measuring device with which to monitor it. And the third measuring device is in itself a quantum system containing uncertainty, and thus requires a fourth measuring device with which to monitor it. And the fourth measuring device is in itself a quantum system containing uncertainty, and that requires a fifth measuring device with which to. . .

[Excerpt from *Quantum Theory A–Ω for Dumb People*, a self-generating database application coded by Professor Beatrice Winterhill and Dr John Smith and distributed by Trojan Horse Software Inc. It works perfectly up until this entry, when it overwrites and locks the host machine's operating system irreparably.

This unfortunate core-code problem was a small but vital factor in the collapse of the Dragos XIV Global Technocracy in 3123, owing to its sudden, knowing and concerted use by neo-Luddite activists. For some reason.]

Morality in sexual relations, when it is free from superstition, consists essentially of respect for the other person, and unwillingness to use the person solely as a means of personal gratification, without regard to his or her desires.

Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, 1929

You think I think you think I think you think I think that, but I think you think I think you think I think you think I think you don't.

Trad.

Sex between a man and a woman can be wonderful – provided you get between the right man and the right woman.

Woody Allen

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Prologue

These are the Three Empires: the savage Dakhaari, the warlike Czhans and the sophisticated, decadent and oilily conniving Saloi, each occupying more or less a third of an entire, segregated sector in what will later become known as the Dagellan Cluster.

None of the Empires can expand now, surrounded as they are by a loose confed-eration of independent planets with a markedly higher technological level; they exist in uneasy border-skirmish stalemate with each other and deadlocked by the world outside.

But now this uneasy stability threatens to be blown catastrophically apart. The sparking point is the small and almost entirely insignificant planet of Moriel, poised equidistant between all three Empires' spaces and thus, potentially, of supreme tactical value for any concerted, overt campaign. Even now the fleets of Dakhaar, Czhanos and Saloi hang over the little planet, preparing for a three-way battle that will overtip the balance of powers irreparably.

And this is something that the true owners of the Three Empires cannot allow.

It must be prevented, by any means possible, and to this end the Hollow Gods of what will later be called the Dagellan Cluster have laid their own, and quite inimical, plans.

In another part of the neutral spaces they have caused to be built a self-enclosed station, all bronze, porphyry and jade, the offices for a Summit in which the fates of Empires will truly be resolved. . .

In the bridge of the sleek Saloi war-stiletto, Sareth watched Administrator Morweth as he gazed through a viewing port filled edge to edge with the perfectly reflective energy field that encapsulated the Summit. Off to one side, visible through several smaller ports, the lashed-together cargo-cult debris of a Dakhaari vessel and a blunt iron Czhanos dreadnought hung in space before the field. Like the Saloi, they had braved the twentieth of a standard light *gik* exclusion zone around the Summit alone.

And, just like the Saloi, they probably had a hundred-odd ships waiting on the edge of the exclusion zone and ready to pile in at a moment's notice.

'If one ship can get through the barrier,' Administrator Morweth mused, toying idly with an intricately coded poison needle before slipping it back into the sleeve of his shabby black cloak, 'more can get through. We only have find the way.'

1

I doubt it, Sareth thought. I very much doubt it.

When the Hollow Gods had manifested – vast, grey, insubstantial figures standing miles into the sky on every Saloi-occupied planet – their eardrum-bursting words, which rang around the worlds, had been specific. The leader of every Empire, the absolute Ruler, must take himself here with a retinue of no more than one hundred, there and nowhere else to decide their respective Imperial fates. Anyone else attempting to enter the vicinity, so much as one more person, would be destroyed with neither warning nor mercy.

And this had proved to be the case. The Saloi exploratory outriders had exploded the instant they crossed into the exclusion zone. And so had precisely fifteen people aboard the war-stiletto itself – the fifteen extra Saloi who had been included in a similar spirit of slight experimentation with the rules. The Hollow Gods were all-powerful, had destroyed entire star systems in the past on a whim, and this was merely a selective confirmation of their power. Such subterfuge would, categorically, not be allowed.

And this was also why *Morweth* was here, in his rough and patchwork robes and with his roughly shaved head; a humble little clerk and dogsbody compared with the rest of the Saloi delegation in their glistening, if uniformly black and concealing, finery. His official title in the Byzantine hierarchy of the Saloi Provisional Administration was

that of Assistant sub-Administratorial Secretary Without Portfolio for the Pursuance of Imperial and Local Sewerage Regulation and Common Hygiene.

He was, in fact, the absolute ruler of the Saloi Empire.

Under the Emperor, of course – even though the Emperor had not in fact been seen around and about for some two thousand-odd Saloi years. The Provisional Administration was merely taking care of things until he turned up again – and it was quite prepared to wait for as long as it took.

And similarly, circuitously, the apparent shabbiness and penury of Morweth himself had cost a fortune to produce: the precise stain on the hem of his robe here, a precisely defined clump of hairs missed by the razor there, a lead pipe in his ostensibly squalid private apartments on the Saloi homeworld that gurgled at precisely the same time each day. . .

the trappings of the

Assistant sub-Administratorial Secretary Without Portfolio for the Pursuance of Imperial and Local Sewerage Regulation and Common Hygiene had over the centuries become formalized and ritualized down to the very last detail –

for the simple reason that the subject of such a ‘secret’ would ordinarily have the life expectancy of a snail in a blender unless *everybody knew about it*.

Sareth, officially, was merely a secondary functionary in Morweth’s sub-administratory division. In fact, in much the same way as the word ‘hygiene’

was used euphemistically on twentieth-century Earth, he was the head of a collective body known colloquially as the Removal Men.

2

The Removal Men took the waste of the Saloi Empire away and disposed of it.

Now Sareth said: ‘We’ll have allies inside, just a few. I’ve placed good and courageous Saloi agents into both of the other delegations. I can activate them any time we have the need.’

‘And have the foul and cowardly savages and the soldiers infiltrated our own forces with spies, I wonder?’ Morweth said, his eyes still on the viewing port.

‘Of course. We know who they are.’

Morweth smiled. ‘And, of course, the Dakhaari and the Czhans know who *our* people are.’

‘Yes. I oversaw the leaking of the information myself.’

‘Ah, but they are sure to have detected your subtle hand in this, by the fact that there was nothing whatsoever suspicious about their means of learning it.’

Sareth nodded. ‘I made quite sure of that. That is, after all, what we are ultimately counting on.’

Morweth frowned into the distant mirror of the energy field. ‘But if they *realize* that. . . ?’

‘Then I have contingency plans,’ said Sareth.

Outside, before the three floating ships, three holes opened up in the energy field to reveal what lay within.

The three factions trooped separately through labyrinthian enamel-inlaid corridors, each delegation progressing with something of its individual Imperial character.

The Saloi sidled through them, darting from shadow to shadow, their backs to the walls, their forearms raised to shield their lower faces with their black robe sleeves.

The Czhans marched through the corridors in full dress uniform with additional braid and frogging, their ceremonial sabres clashing in tempo to the bellows of sergeants and the strains of a military zinc band.

The Dakhaari rampaged: through the corridors, squabbling and fighting among themselves, pulling out and stealing the fixtures and, in several cases, trying to eat them.

Each delegation was led by a mechanical contrivance, humanoid in form and built from self-winding clockwork of a surpassing subtlety and complexity.

These automata had met the various parties upon their respective entrances to the Summit, and now led them in silence, save for when they would pause at doorways and speak a single, clacking, punchcard-driven phrase:

'Sleep rooms for retinue.'

'Sleep rooms for guards.'

3

'Sleep rooms for Leader.'

'Food room.'

'Washing room.'

'Private talking room for Leader.'

'Spare room.'

. . . until at last they each came to a massive set of bronze-and-brass doors blocking the corridor, which swung slowly open at a touch, and each automaton stated, in unison with its distant fellows: ' *Ballroom.*'

Sareth entered the ballroom first – to take any projectile that might be meant for his Administrator – and looked about himself.

Here was a vast, translucent dome of jade ribbed with intertwining strands of metal and with a chessboard floor of white and pastel marble. Off to one side was a door that presumably led into the conference chambers proper.

Presumably, because, from the doorways on the other side and opposite him, the other delegations were arriving.

Sareth noted that while the Czhanos and the Dakhaari leaders had markedly different psychologies from Administrator Morweth, and from each other for that matter, they were also not bloody fools. A snarling slave and a dutiful foot soldier had entered, initially, like himself.

Sareth took in the surroundings, noted that the clockwork automata had retreated to join several others standing still and silent against the walls, and made a complicated gesture back to Morweth: communicating the layout and various positions of likely attack, indicating a certain degree of evaluational safety and motioning him

forward.

He stepped aside to allow the Administrator past, fell into step behind and to one side of him, keeping a watchful eye on the other delegations as they, too, filed into the room.

Heading for the centre.

At the head of the Czhans was a huge, barrel-chested male, of the bipedal hominid type that was common to all three Empires save for the milk-white skin, the jet-black hair and the vestigial tusks that were the distinctive characteristics of the soldier-race. Muscles threatening to burst his uniform, head held firmly aloft, he towered head and shoulders over even the largest of his subordinates.

This was Koth, Supreme Commander of All Czhanos Forces, and Saloi propaganda held that his imposing form was the result of corsets and prolonged hormonal treatments. Sareth, whose business it was to know such things, knew that it was all muscle and bone and clean living. The Supreme Commander marched stiffly, plumed ceremonial helmet clutched to his side, and 4

his eyes blazed with an inherent, constant and absolutely controlled rage that was visible even across the expanse of the domelike hall.

At the head of the Dakhaari – and aiming a series of vicious and bludgeoning backhanders at any overexcited male members of her party who attempted to run ahead – was Ravla, the Warrior Queen, olive-green-skinned with slitted ears and whipcord-lithe as a feral cat save in certain, secondary, if highly prominent, respects.

Saloi propaganda held that Ravla had personally murdered fifteen thousand of her own people, had overseen the mass murder of some twenty million more and had once killed a hundred and forty-seven of her so-called ‘hus-bands’ in a single night. Sareth, whose business it was to know such things, knew that these figures were greatly exaggerated. The last number was more like seven. Three of them without the need for murder.

Sareth suppressed a little shudder. Who knew what dark passions and hideous excesses still lurked in Ravla’s tempestuously heaving breast? Whatever they were, there would have to be an extraordinarily large and extremely frightening amount of them.

Now, as the factions approached each other from ninety-degree angles, Sareth began to feel uneasy. An adept of gauging the general

atmosphere of an environment from a million tiny subliminal signals, he became aware of the increasing tensions and distrust now that the factions were at last face to face to face.

It was as though a wave of mutual rage had crashed down into the dome, and then another, and then another, filling it up with every passing second.

Filling it completely. Sareth noted, out of the corner of his eye, how his fellow Saloi were surreptitiously fiddling with their concealed weapons. He noted the postures of the Czhanos and Dakhaari delegations as they readied themselves for combat.

And he knew that in bare seconds from now – despite their collective duty to the Hollow Gods, despite the Hollow Gods' power to enforce it destructively, despite anything anyone here might consciously do to try to diffuse the state of affairs – the tension was going to snap and the chamber would be plunged into catastrophic bloodshed.

Had this been the Hollow Gods' plan all along? Simply to place the three Rulers in a killing bottle so that they might destroy each other?

And it was at this point, as the embodiments of Empires advanced upon each other, that the air between them shimmered, scintillated and bluely co-alesced. A bronchial, asthmatic wheezing roared and juddered and reverberated through the green jade dome.

5

Chapter One

The smallish, yellowish and almost entirely unremarkable sun of Jaris crawled over the horizon and hauled itself dispiritedly across the sky. It wasn't in any particular hurry, and it was going to be a long day of illuminating nothing but the dry grassland that covered the vast majority of the planet.

The tundra was delineated only by the roads, punctuated only by the mines, the only living movement being the scattered, slowly roaming herds of her-bivorous *fupi* that, *en masse*, had all the rolling majesty and interest of the globules in a lava lamp.

The smallish, yellow sun of Jaris had held onto the planet and bathed it in the spectral stuff of life and death for several thousand millions of years now, in the hope that it would ever do something even remotely interesting. One of these days it probably wouldn't bother.

And then, suddenly, in the blink of a solar eye, the planet exploded like two pounds of uranium 235 banged together by an idiot – the knock-on effect sending several large lumps of strata caroming into three neighbouring planets, seven artificial satellites and a natural moonlet, ripping off or out their various crusts or atmospheres and destroying every single living thing in or on or under each.

The sun of what had once been Jaris was so enthralled by the display that it entirely failed to register the small shower of still-fissioning debris that struck itself and which would, via a metasizic chain-reaction over the next couple of million years, kill it plasma-cold dead with the stellar equivalent of cancer.

Which, given that suns give people cancers on purpose, was probably poetic justice of a sort.

The consciousness of suns operates upon a timescale unimaginable to human beings. In generally human terms, then, the explosion of Jaris was merely the end result of a catastrophic environmental cascade-process, lasting more than one thousand, four hundred and seventy local years and triggered by the convective, climactic and gravitational disruptions of the sudden appearance of a collection of alien molecules that had no business being there in the first place.

Something that appeared out of nowhere.

Benny Summerfield lay flat on her back, gazing up at an endless azure sky and sucking in lungfuls of warm, dry air. It smelt of hay with the strangely 7

pleasant scent of the dung of things that live off hay. If only, she thought, with remarkable restraint under the circumstances, I wasn't lying stark naked in the middle of what feels like a large particularly squelchy example of it.

Cautiously, she climbed to her feet and looked around. She was in the middle of what appeared to be a small crop circle in a plain of waist-high yellow grass. The grassland rippled and a breeze played across her face – the minuscule precursor, though she would never know it, of the winds and the firestorms that would eventually rip the entire planet apart.

Movement. Benny almost flung herself flat, recalled just in time what she was going to fling herself flat in and decided to take whatever dangerous thing that was moving as it came.

Slowly a number of bulky, piebald, black-and-white animals of a breed that seemed some hybrid of a friesian cow and a three-toed sloth, were rising from the grass, from where they had presumably flung themselves flat on her arrival. There were a lot of them, but they didn't seem particularly dangerous.

They looked at her with solemn eyes and one of them went 'Foop.'

'Marvellous,' Benny said sourly. 'I don't suppose any of you guys have seen a big blue box anywhere? Little chap with a hat inside? You can't miss him, on account of how he'll have saved the lot of you from evil villains and horrible monsters and such.'

'Foop,' said another one of the animals.

'Foop,' all the rest agreed, seriously.

'How perfectly lovely for you,' said Benny. No help from that quarter then.

So where the hell was everybody else?

The last thing she remembered was that they all had been leaving the colony on Yemaya 4 – Roz Forrester, Chris Cwej, the Doctor and herself The friends they'd met there, Byerly and Cinnabar, had finally managed to get married and this had depressed Benny slightly, on some complex inner level that she was damned if she was going to explore, because it was probably going to involve biological clocks and sad female fantasies about squirting some ghastly little puke-spraying sprog out into the world.

And it really wasn't like that at all. It just made her feel a little still and cool and melancholy inside and it was no big deal. Really.

The Doctor, turning from the TARDIS console after dematerialization, had noticed her mood and had said with that uncharacteristic tentativeness he reserved for the large areas of human experience to which he had absolutely no way of relating whatsoever: 'Are you feeling quite all right, Benny?'

Benny had merely shrugged and grinned. 'It's just the romance of it all, you know? You know it's incredibly dumb, you know it's only a matter of time before they start squabbling and hating each other, or maybe just go passionless and distant, or she starts doing some spiteful little number on 8

him, or he hits a woman for the first time ever in his life and then swears blind he won't ever do it ever again, ever. Or one of them meets somebody else by total accident and realizes she's made the worst mistake of her –'

She broke off, suddenly aware that Roz Forrester was looking at her with sympathetic concern, and that Chris Cwej was looking at her with panic.

'You envy those dumb moments,' she said self-consciously. 'Those little, unsustainable flashes of happy-ever-after and you wish the world was really like that.' She shrugged again. 'Sometimes you just wish it really was all true, true love and hearts and flowers and knights in shining armour on white chargers whisking you away from it all and –'

And then the world had gone blank.

And then she was here. Flat on her back in a field full of the local equivalent of cowshit, with no sense of transition, and all her clothes seemed to have fallen off.

What worried her most was not the sudden change in itself, but whatever strange power might be putatively watching over her – capable as it were of rewriting her life at a stroke and probably waiting for the appropriate moment to do it – that such a power should be so incredibly bloody asinine. If this was, as she half suspected, the work of the Doctor in some way or other, she was going to wring his bloody neck.

Something slippery was still sliding off her naked back. Benny steeled herself for the worst and looked down.

Instead of what she had been expecting she saw a loose, gelatinous substance that – she realized with a small start – was the precise cornelian shade as the suit she had worn for the wedding. That explained the lack of clothing: something had relaxed its molecular bonds. A result of whatever process that had translated her here? A process that worked only on living tissue.

Feeling slightly better about herself she brushed the last vestiges of the gunk from her back. She looked around one final time, saw nothing but grass and things going foop, so chose a direction more or less at random. Pausing only to collect a handful of grass from which she could fashion herself a little plaited shawl as a protection from the noonday sun, she started to walk.

Maybe she would find some sort of landmark to tell her where – and for what matter when – she was. If not, she would – have to wait for night and try to check the constellations.

Almost anybody other than Benny Surprise Summerfield, suddenly and instantly finding themselves in a strange new environment, would have been severely traumatized; it would have been so utterly outside their field of experience that their mind would have quite simply shut down in shock, 9

Benny, however, had been somewhat inoculated against this by her interdimensional and intertemporal travels with the Doctor – and having a large number of personal internal reserves to boot. So she managed to cope slightly better. After several hours of trudging through waist-high grass under a sun in a featureless sky, she merely found herself feeling bored out of her skull.

Several of the animals (which she had instinctively started to call *foops* in her head) ambled along beside her. They seemed to be cultivated, which spoke of some other and intelligent presence – but then again their state might be simply due to the fact that there seemed to be no indigenous predators.

Visibly, at any rate. (Killers living more than a couple of hops up the food chain tend to become invisible, and produce the short-term impression that they don't exist.)

Benny came upon proof that the former was the case suddenly: the flat terrain meant that she could not distinguish anything other than grassland until she was almost on top of it.

It was a set of solar-powered pumping mechanisms, pumping water from subterranean aquifers into a perfectly circular drinking pool. One look at the pumps was enough to tell her that they had been made by basically humanoid hands.

That located her, temporally at least, somewhere in her own three-million-year-odd bandwidth. She tried to read the faintly cyrillic lettering stamped onto the components and failed.

An overgrown track led off from the drinking pool, and roughly two hours walking along that took her to a perfectly straight road running off to the sky-line in either direction, It was built from some smooth and extruded substance that appeared to inhibit vegetable growth: no grass or weeds were growing on it. The foops were, to a foop, studiously avoiding it.

The sun was now on the horizon and insects chirruped in the grass, herald-ing the night-phase of what Benny judged was approximately a thirty-hour cycle. Far down the road Benny saw crawling lights that might or might not be the headlamps of vehicles.

She was dog-tired, heat-fevered, covered in grass-cuts and almost doubled up with dehydration cramps, even after gorging herself on the water of the drinking pool. She simply sat down by the side of the road and waited for a lift.

10

Chapter Two

In a tiny closet in a small room appended to a larger barracks hut on Czhanos, a slightly muffled conversation was taking place.

'What the Goddess is *that*?' a female voice cried with some alarm.

'Look I'm *sorry*, okay?' a younger-sounding, male and highly embarrassed voice said. 'I'm not doing it on purpose.'

'Oh, this is ridiculous,' the first voice said. 'Look, if you could just shift around a little, I can –'

'Ow!'

'Sorry. I can see a line of light. I think it's a door. If I can just get my hand on the knob. . . '

There was a muffled fumbling.

After a while the second, male, voice said: 'Um, Roz, I don't think that's the knob you're in fact looking for.'

'Ah.' There was a brief pause. 'Sorry.'

More fumbling, a click, the door swung open and Roslyn Forrester and Christopher Rodonante Cwej spilled out naked onto the floorboards. Forrester and Cwej were a century-thirty Adjudicator and her Squire.

To a twentieth-century observer they would appear, respectively, as a slim black woman and a blond, beefy and almost excessively obvious male. But there was a subtle distinction which they shared: a hint of gold about them, as though they were gently lit from within.

There was a certain sense of beauty, a streamlined sleekness about

them that came from being born slightly higher up the evolutionary ladder than any twentieth-century observer and of having had a thousand-odd more years to play around with in the natural-selection stakes. The lack of a veriform appendix and wisdom molars were the least of it. Indeed – though they remained completely unaware of it – they were in many ways the *ubermenschen* of which countless psychotics and despots had dreamed. It was merely the natural and automatic result of years of widespread interbreeding between the racial groupings of Earth, each with its own invaluable cards to add to the genetic deck. And the fact that efforts in history to create such 'supermen' had tended to rely upon the complete opposite – on segregation, repression and racial extermination – probably tells us something about the true dreams of psychotics and despots. And what they really think about supermen.

11

Now this superwoman, Roslyn Forrester, climbed to her feet and groaned.

'My arse is going to be one huge bloody bruise,' she said sourly.

Chris Cwej had bounded to his feet instantly, and was looking around the little room, taking in the bare steel walls and the neatly folded steel-framed cot with the barely contained exuberance of an overexcited red setter.

'Hey, that was really weird,' he burbled. 'One minute we were there in the TARDIS and the next we were gone. We were here. What happened? Where are we?'

'I don't know,' said Roz. 'I'll ask.'

She raised her head towards the ceiling and her voice towards the roof 'Hey, mysterious thing that made the TARDIS disappear! Cwej wants to know what happened and where we are!' She turned to glower at Chris. 'How the hell am I supposed to bloody know?'

'Now I know you're only doing that because it's how you deal with strange and inexplicable things,' said Chris amiably, pulling the cot open with a squeak and peering at it.

'Look at that,' he said thoughtfully. 'It's made by and for something basically humanoid, but not human. You can tell that by the little details. That hinge, for example; it works on roughly the same principle but it. . . '

He chuntered on in this vein for a while. This boundless energy and enthusi-asm, Roz knew, was Cwej's own method of dealing with strangeness. She was going to have to stop him before he produced a screwdriver from somewhere horrible and started happily dismantling the entire room.

'We have to get moving,' she said. 'We have to find out more about the situation. Little things like which people are going to be pleased to see us, and which are just going to blast us first and ask questions later, yes?'

Also, she reflected, she wanted to find people who wouldn't look at her and ask her if she wasn't feeling a little chilly – because by that time, if it were humanly possible, she would have some clothes on.

She recollected that, when she had been trapped in the closet with Cwej, there had been some things in there that felt a little like clothes. The closet door had swung automatically shut on a little hydraulic item that served the same function as a spring. She opened it again.

'Well, I was right about humanoid,' Cwej said, looking over her shoulder.

'That looks like a uniform, and an impressive one at that. Pity it's too big for you.' Roz was going to tell him precisely what she thought about that –

but then other, slightly more reasonable, thoughts occurred. The uniform was ridiculously big for her, but just the right size for Chris. And it might just conceivably become important for somebody to be dressed for the part than to have someone who looked as though they were wearing a floppy tent.

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'Don't worry about it, Roz,' Chris said, pulling out the splendid braided jacket and examining it cheerfully. 'We'll probably find something for you. At some point. Do you know your nostrils go all distended when you're angry.

In the control room of the TARDIS, the Doctor was watching a screen with half an eye, the majority of his quite considerable attention span directed to the translucent, glowing envelope in his hand. The envelope was rather stiff, consisting as it did of some hard, smooth calcite substance like mother-of-pearl.

It was an invitation. He had received one like it once before, back before his first regeneration, when he had infested a more-or-less human and effectively mortal corporeal form. That particular invitation had been to an interspecieal diplomatic gathering on Luna in 1609 – by the Gregorian calendar – and it had resulted in nothing but trouble.

The problem was that they couldn't, it seemed, be declined or even ignored.

By some process he had completely failed to discern, then or now, the things seemed able to subvert the TARDIS operating system on the deepest possible levels. The moment he had found the invitation in his pocket while in the midst of giving his old corduroy jacket a long-overdue spring-clean, the TARDIS had simply and suddenly given a great lurch and a shudder, and had materialized.

This was extremely devious and sneaky. He was beginning to suspect that the culprit might be himself at some point.

The sudden and simultaneous disappearances of all three of his travelling companions was also a mystery. Again, he couldn't remember doing it at any point – but once again that didn't prove a thing. He could never resist for long the impulse to fiddle, to attempt once again to rewrite the wrongs of the world. And, time and time again, as it were, he'd found it backfiring on him before he'd even started.

'Maybe I should try to cultivate a sense of tranquillity,' he mused to Wolsey the cat. 'Of passivity, even. For a while. Maybe Alistair had the right idea with his prana and Nirvana – or was that just the popular beat combo that Ace used to like?'

Wolsey merely whimpered. At the point when Roz and Chris had softly and suddenly vanished away, the TARDIS had instantly relaxed several of the illusions it maintained to prevent them from being terrified out of their shrieking human minds and clawing out their eyes. The Time Lord normally retained these illusions as a kind of default-setting, because you never knew when you might find yourself with company – but the relevant sections of the memory banks seemed to have been utterly and completely wiped.

It was as though something had simply wiped his companions, utterly and completely, from his life. He made a small mental note to worry

about that at some point.

Wolsey's own eyes were perfectly safe, of course, clawing them out being something that it would never occur to a cat to do. But Wolsey was almost wishing that it would. He was also regretting having eaten lunch. Both lunch today and lunch the day before, neither of which was much of an improvement the second time around.

'Quite a pleasant set of people to meet, though,' the Time Lord mused on, seemingly all oblivious. 'A little pale and gloomy, though, and I think that some of them were abusing drugs. . .

'Yes!' he suddenly decided, sticking his finger in the air for pontificatory emphasis, though there was no one but the TARDIS – and Wolsey – there to see. 'Tranquillity and passivity shall be the order of the day! The stork has been measured and found wanting; from now on It s God Log in his. Heaven and all's right with the best of all possible worlds! Everything generally sorts itself out in the end, if you only have the patience to wait for it so to do.'

On the screen, several warlike-looking figures had recovered from the shock of something blue appearing in their midst, and were once again in the process of reaching for their various weapons.

'Then again,' said the Doctor to himself, 'heaven can probably wait.'

He crossed to the. . . *thing* in the centre of the control room and prodded a part of its mass, which tried to bite him. The TARDIS doors swung open and he darted out.

And through the doors there wafted back the words that had inspired unexpected hope in millions, and nameless dread in millions more.

'Hello there! I'm the Doctor and this is my friend. . . oh.' A pause. 'Friends, I'm afraid, as such, seem to be in rather short supply at the moment. Look, if you could just put those away for a moment, then maybe we could try it all again from the start. . . '

Several confusing moments later, the little man who had called himself Doctor stood peaceably, amid several surly and mistrustful armed guards of several species, while Queen Ravla, Administrator Morweth and Supreme Commander Koth argued about, and indeed over, him.

'This is all some trick of the Saloi!' cried Ravla, 'They have forged some foul alliance with this odd and ugly-looking little alien race to

murder us all! Who knows what powers lurk inside his appearing-out-of-nowhere thing and set to be unleashed upon us!'

'I assure you that this is not the case,' said Morweth suavely.

14

A look of uncertainty passed briefly across the Administrator's pointed poker-features and he turned back to Sareth, who as ever stood behind him and to one side. 'Is it?'

'Ah.' Sareth was momentarily nonplussed. For all he knew Morweth's uncertainty was genuine – but then again this little man might be a. Saloi agent known only to Morweth himself. And even if he wasn't then it might suit the Administrator to have Sareth *pretend* that he was. . .

It is a matter of which I am certainly not aware either,' Sareth hazarded eventually and somewhat lamely.

'Quite so.' Morweth turned from him to regard Commander Koth of the Czhans inquiringly.

'Well, I'll thank ye not to look at *me*,' the big man growled indignantly.

'Treacherous subterfuge and perfidy in war is not the Czhanos way! A good firm manly shafting with a length of honest steel is our watchword! What need have *I* of your devious and cunning ways while I have my strong right arm and trusty fist!' He shook this last item for emphasis, and then slowly turned to glare suspiciously at Ravla. . .

The Warrior Queen, who had been following this last outburst with a sudden and slightly speculative interest, now spat at Koth viciously.

'Any time you want it,' she snarled, slipping from the Elevated-Tongue-of-Empire diplomacy into her native singsong Dakhaari argot, while raising her own fists like a pugilist, rattling the heavy length of gearchain gripped between them. 'You want some? Come and have a go if you think you're *hard* enough –'

' *SILENCE!* '

The multiple, simultaneous voices rang around the dome, bludgeoning the eardrum-analogues of all who were there like a thunderclap.

Around the walls and converging towards the roof, blotting out the still-silently waiting automata, surrounding the three diplomatic parties and the uninvited late arrival, huge if slightly indistinct forms flickered into being.

The Hollow Gods were much, much smaller than when they had been seen last. This was probably fortunate, since the last time they had been some five hundred miles tall, and in such a state they wouldn't have been able to fit into the dome.

As it was, their vast robed and cowled forms seemed to fill it completely.

' *YOU WILL OBEY OUR EVERY COMMAND!* ' they roared.

'Do you know,' the little man who had called himself the Doctor said chattily, to no one in particular, 'if I had a penny for every time someone's said something of that nature to me, I'd have –'

He totted it up quickly on his fingers and his face fell slightly. 'Well actually, I'd only have forty-seven pounds nine shillings and fourpence, But it's still 15

quite an impressively large number of times, even so.'

He looked around for the guards who had been, bracketing him. 'Oh, you've gone.'

He only now seemed to become aware that every other person in the dome was on hands and knees, banging the floor with their heads and muttering supplications. Some of the braver, such as Ravla, Koth and Sareth – who took care of such things as being brave for his Administrator – were frantically signalling for him to do likewise. This was not precisely out of altruism – the Wrath of the Hollow Gods tended to spill over with Extreme Prejudice.

But the little man just stood there.

'Hello?' he said, looking up at the vast grey figures. 'Do I gather that you're in charge around these parts? I seem to recognize the little telltale signs.'

' *SILENCE!* ' the Hollow Gods roared again.

'Well, feel free to please yourselves, I'm sure.'

An insubstantial hand the size of a Saloi People's Automobile prodded down at him. ' *YOU ARE THE TIME LORD KNOWN TO THOSE WHO KNOW NO BETTER AS "THE DOCTOR". WE HAVE BEEN WATCHING YOU.* '

'Not recently, I trust,' said the Time Lord known as the Doctor. 'I thought I'd sorted out the last problem of that kind several subjective years ago. And if,' he continued sternly, addressing the pointing finger, 'you're a collection of those distasteful individuals who collect the surviving footage of Peri in the bath, or even –' he shuddered '– Mel, then I have to tell you that –'

The Hollow Gods shouted for *SILENCE* again. This time appreciably louder.

And off to one side, as he continued to bang his head on the floor and pray supplicatively that his eardrums wouldn't burst, Sareth could hardly believe the corners of his eyes as they relayed the scene. This little man, with his snaggle teeth and beady eyes and stiletto-rocket-launch-away hair, with his patched and mismatched clothes that made him look as though he'd been assembled from spare parts and leftovers, was standing unafraid and talking nonsense before the Hollow Gods and he was still alive.

And still standing.

Now the man who called himself the Doctor merely waited, a quizzical little expression on his face that reminded Sareth of Administrator Morweth laying the groundwork for one of his most complex cold-blooded and compassionless schemes – save that it wasn't. It was something utterly at odds with this, and the only similarity was the physical expression.

It was some time before Sareth got it. The little man was simply and honestly interested in what was going to happen next.

'Well?' said the Doctor. To the Hollow Gods. Quietly. 'I'm listening.'

This sudden change in the atmosphere seemed to take the grey figures a little by surprise. It was some small while before they replied: 16

'YOUR PUNY SO-CALLED SCIENCES ARE NO MATCH FOR OURS, TIME

LORD,' they said. *'WE HAVE GATHERED AND TRAPPED YOUR CONVEYANCE*

HERE, AND HERE IT SHALL REMAIN.

'YOU HA VE BEEN CHOSEN TO BE THE ARBITER, TIME LORD. THOSE THAT

WE OWN ARE AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS AND WE WOULD HAVE YOU SETTLE THEIR DIFFERENCES BY DIPLOMATIC MEANS. FOR EVEN THE LOSS OF A SINGLE UNNECESSARY LIFE SADDENS US MUCH.

'THUS ARE WE MERCIFUL. ' The Hollow Gods paused briefly.

'BUT BE WARNED, TIME LORD. SHOULD YOU FAIL, WE SHALL SIMPLY

SMITE OUR SLAVES AND CHATTELS MIGHTILY, FORCING UPON THEM ALL

THE SIMPLE PEACE OF MERE OBLIVION AND THE GRAVE.'

They paused, again briefly.

'AND THAT GOES FOR YOU, TOO.'

They vanished. It was as though they had never been there.

'Well!' The man who called himself the Doctor clapped his hands and briskly glanced around at those gathered here prostrated. 'That seems perfectly straight-forward. Have that sorted out in no time.'

He looked around at all of them again, as they clambered unsteadily and slightly shamefaced to their feet. 'I really think that one of you might have said something.'

17

Chapter Three

In the back room of the Fatigue Shebeen, Jason Kane coldly returned the level snake-eyed gazes of Medusa AI and thanked his lucky stars that his UV shades were cutting out the vitriotic kill-emissions.

He flipped his gaze to the left of the forest of viperlike growths sprouting from the obloidular body – and found himself looking straight into the extended and slavering secondary jaws of Hammerhead. Warm and slightly stinging sweat sprang from his brow and a rivulet trickled into his left eye, and all he wanted – all he really wanted to do – was

to twitch.

Jason Kane remained absolutely immobile for three long seconds, and then, very slowly, very smoothly, turned his head to look at the fourth figure at the table – sitting relaxed and easy on the other side of Medusa AI.

This figure was predominantly humanoid save for a pronounced and red-dish pigment, as though he had been sucking betel nuts in terminal quantities for a fortnight. It had elongated and vaguely leprous ears.

Rabbit Jack. Big hominid on Jaris; finger in every carrot cake – like as not broken off from someone who *had* fingers once and who had crossed him.

Rabbit Jack twitched his slightly prehensile nose towards the cash on the table. His own remaining dominoes were clutched negligently in one pawlike hand. With the other he pulled a clockwork turnip watch from his lizardskin waistcoat.

'Make your call, flyboy,' he said in his relaxed, easy an not at all squeaky voice. 'You're wasting time. Tick-tock.' He swung the watch absently on its chain. 'Tick-tock.'

Jason didn't bother to look at his own dominoes. He just watched Rabbit Jack's face for a while, and then he split eis own face open in a wide and pellet-eating and consciously controlled grin.

'I've got Acros Magnus the Seventh Kai Psychomancer,' he said, 'Shami the Votiational Temple Dancer of the Universal World-Spider, and Mister Pronk the Fupi Farmer.'

He clicked the little enamelled jade and porphyry tiles down on the table, filling three final gaps in the complicated symbolic arrangement. 'Happy Brood-polyps. Read 'em and break down cathartically.'

He was making to scoop up his winnings when he realized that there were eyes on him like gimlets. Those were Hammerhead's, and they were like 19

gimlets because they were telescopic prisms of razor-sharp silicon some ten centimetres long. And with a whiplash of Hammerhead's extensible cable-corded neck they were perfectly capable of giving him a degree of penetration he would never forget.

The other eyes on him were respectively those of a nest of tiny snakes and those of a hairless, sentient, carnivorous and suddenly incredibly suspicious scarlet *Oryctolagus cuniculus* – and neither set of eyes was much of a relief.

'Y'know, it strikes me,' said Rabbit Jack, still very relaxed and easy, 'that for several hours now you've been pulling the exact right chop out of the stack at *precisely* the right time. Your luck, it seems, is quite phenomenal.'

'Phenomenal,' agreed Medusa AI through his speech-adapted growths –

which, given that there were almost a hundred of these alone, transformed the word into something polyphonic and thirty seconds long and sprayed all and sundry with little flecks of sticky and slightly corrosive Medusoid saliva.

'Roar,' said Hammerhead, which was the only word it knew. But when you look like Freud's worst slimy nightmare, are born by exploding spectacularly out of somebody's sternum, can brutally slaughter the entire crew of a star-ship, the population of an exploratory colony and the inmates of a prison complex in an hour and a half and then hound any last survivor across half a galaxy until they kill themselves with their own flamethrower just to put themselves out of their misery and avoid the subsequent complications of the child-access rights – when you can do all that it's amazing how hard people will work to pick up on your every little inflective nuance.

Jason Kane began to sweat in earnest. 'Hey listen, guys –' he began.

'I think,' said Rabbit Jack, staring fixedly at the left sleeve of Jason Kane's leather jacket, 'that we should play just one more hand. Two chops each, high-low. Double or quits. Just you and me. I really think we should do that, don't you?'

'Um,' said Jason.

'Difference is,' said Rabbit Jack. 'Loser wins, winner loses.'

Rabbit Jack produced a handgun with a snout you could fire a sewer-cleaning pig up. It was like magic, really. 'And I mean really loses, you get me?'

Which was what Jason Kane had by this point been expecting, but that didn't make it any easier.

He wasn't in fact much good at domino games, or card games, or for that matter dice games, or indeed any other games where the laws of chance can be, shall we say, helped along a little by some subtle additional manipulation.

What he was good at, in his own little limited and admittedly slightly sneaky way, was the building and programming of clever little items of equipment like the one currently up his left sleeve that would do it all for you – opti-20

cally scanning, computing the various odds and moves and then zapping the nerves of the hand with little electrical shocks to perform these right moves automatically.

The tiny AI brain inside the thing was quite sophisticated – but not quite sophisticated enough suddenly to start losing intentionally. There was no way he could lose unless he switched it off, by the mechanical rocker-switch set in the side.

Medusa AI had picked up a fresh stack of dominoes and was shuffling them among his manipulatory tentacles. Male Medusoids were the only ones who had them, which went some way to explain the neurotic-compulsive scrubbing of their own hands by almost anyone who had ever met one.

Now he slammed two five-domino chops and the main pile down simultaneously and with a crash. 'Play.'

The ten-second spray of alien phlegm momentarily annoyed Rabbit Jack.

He shot a reproving glance at AI – and that gave Jason all the time he needed.

He bounced to his feet, boosting the chair back to clatter against the back room wall, hauling his own gun from his jacket pocket: a small-gauge mi-croflenser of the sort commonly sold to the distaff side of the more bipolar sentient species and which looked as if it belonged on the end of a keyring.

He jammed it to his own head.

'Okay!' he screamed at the assembled startled face-equivalents. 'Okay! One move and the Earthman gets it! I'll blow his shuggin' cognitive ganglions out, you come near!'

Hammerhead, who had been quietly bringing its cranial mass back for a devastating head-butt, slowly ratcheted it forward again. Several of Medusa AI's manipulatory growths had whipped themselves into his main mass in startlement.

A nonplussed Rabbit Jack stared at Jason, his own gun wavering slightly.

'Hey, kid,' he said. 'Don't –'

'I mean it!' Jason screamed, backing for the door. 'Gonna make a toasty *hole*, you come near!'

'Roar,' exclaimed Hammerhead in alarm. 'Roar roar *roar* roar.'

'Oh yeah,' Jason spat. He ground the generator grid of the flenser viciously into his temple. 'Like I'm gonna trust *you*?'

He made it to the door and kicked it open with his heel, backed out, turned, and ran like the Multiple Hells.

For several seconds the three remaining figures sat in silence, listening to the increasingly distant thumps and crashes and curses from the bar outside.

'What was it,' said Rabbit Jack at last, 'the funny-looking little shugger shouted just after he went through the door?' He tried to fit his hare-lip, 21

as it were, around the unfamiliar-sounding words. ' *An-for-my-nex-impreshun-jessiowins*? What was that supposed to be?'

'Roar,' said Hammerhead. 'Roar roar roar roar roar roar, roar.'

'Yesh,' agreed Medusa AI, as Hammerhead and Rabbit Jack ducked under the resulting deluge of saliva. 'You're probably right. It'sh probably the dreadful ritual cry of hish shpeshish' Inveterate Shcrotal-Pouch-caste or something.'

He shuffled the dominoes. 'Anybody feel like another game?'

Jason ran from the Shebeen and out into the icy spaceport-hinterland streets of Jaris, the single large-scale settlement on the planet of Jaris, and for that matter the entire Jaris system. A pitiful little backwater of a bolt-hole, founded a couple of century-equivalents ago and comprising the stockyards and slaughterhouses and refineries for the

fupi and the mined carbonites upon which were based the entire planetary economy.

For the umpteenth time he cursed his luck for ending him up here.

Livestock (force-inflated for easy transportation), butchered meat and an-thracite were shipped off-planet in vast and specialized freighters, in quantities with which Jason's rather more diminutive ship simply couldn't compete.

The ship currently sat, berthed out on the landing field, clocking up the dock-age rental to the point where he would never get it out without a paying job.

He couldn't even sell the damned thing for scrap prices and a ticket out – nobody was buying lemons around here, if they knew what a lemon was, which they didn't.

He had been stuck here for months now, trying to put together some sort of deal with the dodgier people who tended to congregate on planets like this, where galactic-sector law was thinnest – people who could stand the unending bucolic and mind-numbing tedium of the place.

The problem was that Jaris and the four hundred-odd other non-aligned worlds in the star cluster shared it with the Three Empires, and the Three Empires were collectively on one of their expansionist kicks and gearing up for war. This was disrupting the more dubious areas of trade a little more than somewhat, since the defensive forces of every non-aligned world were not unnaturally feeling a little paranoid, and any ship that came near them without its authorizations and call-codes buttoned up so tight that they squeaked was likely to find itself blown peremptorily out of the sky with no questions asked.

This does not tend to be a propitious environment for enterprise and trade unless one is an arms dealer, and that was something Jason Kane had never been. Nobody had ever trusted him enough to give him a shipload of dangerous weapons and expect him to deliver them to the right side. Maybe his optical sensory biosystems were too close together or something.

22

Jason trudged on through the almost deserted streets, breath pluming from his lungs and the cold lancing up through the soles of boots worn membrane-thin. Leaving his ill-gotten winnings back at the Shebeen

had ensured that it wasn't worth anybody's time coming after him, but that also meant he was now utterly potless. Never mind food and lodgings for the night: he could spend the night in the ship – but he didn't even have the cab fare to the dock where the ship was berthed.

So he faced a two-hour walk through the night – and the nights on Jaris tended to think they were going it a bit if the ambient temperature approached H2O freezing point; a two-hour walk without a shirt, because he'd pawned it along with various other odds and ends for his stake in the game.

Hunched and shivering under flickering sodium streetlamps in his ancient, battered leather jacket – the only surviving relic of his long lost life on Earth, and the only thing he could and would ever think of as truly his own – Jason went through the pocket sacs of his ragged woven local vegetable-fibre trews.

He sorted through the pitifully small collection of polymer plaques he had unearthed and found that there were probably just enough for the cab.

Either that or a couple of drinks.

The Shebeen was out for a little while of course, but the hinterland zone was packed with bars. He did okay in the first one, walking in as bold as brass and downing a warming cup of resinous balsam, walking out again and smoothly grabbing a voluminous night-time coat from the rack by the door in passing.

The trick was just to do it without thinking; try to clock the unattended one and act all innocent and it's like a magnet: the people see you looking.

The night-coat was simply a coverall for the light clothes worn during the warm Jaris day; valuables weren't kept in them as a rule – but in a side alley as he pulled it apart at the seams he found a couple of small-denomination plaques in the lining.

Jason wound dismembered lengths of synthetic fur around himself in a makeshift jerkin and hauled his own jacket on again. It was going to be far too hot indoors, but he needed to build up his body's core-heat. He hadn't really eaten for days and the thing about hypothermia is that it sneaks up on you unawares.

The next place was a *vleki* bar and he ran an *ingenu* routine, letting something polymorphous and tentacular feel his electrobiological aura

up and ply him with soma sunshine while he stuffed complementary bar-food into his face. Then he faded off into the crowd on the pretext of going to relieve himself psychically – making it obvious that he was heading for the mind-sucker facilities tacitly reserved for that and that alone – and slipping quietly out through a side-hatch before things got too serious. There are just so many moves you can genuinely fake.

23

He was out on the streets again, trying to remember where it was still okay to show his face – an increasingly and depressingly small number of places after several months of nocturnal chancing. Night culture tends towards the insular and word tends to get around.

He settled at last on the Citadel – ordinarily the sort of place he wouldn't be seen dead and putrefying in. But it did mean there was less chance of his running into people who knew him.

And maybe a small change of scene would change his luck.

It did.

The Citadel was the nearest thing the Jaris settlement had to a tourist trap –

there were still tourists even in these days of interplanetary tension, even on a hole in the universe like this.

The itinerant and transient population of spacers, of course, tended to look upon them as the scum of every applicable earth.

The Citadel (or, to give it its full and proper name, the Citadel of Unending Delights) was one of a chain of establishments scattered throughout the independent sectors and catering for this trade. Each was precisely similar to the others and sold precisely similar products, the raw materials of which were shipped in daily, in bulk, from the massive Citadel Central refineries on Paolos IV.

Rather like Coca Cola on Earth, whatever upheavals a planet was going through – be it local genocide: global insurrection or all-out interplanetary war – the shipments to the Citadel franchises somehow still got through.

This particular franchise was on the main thoroughfare of the Jaris settlement – a street originally named with the happy and fanciful wit endemic to the original Jaris settlers as The Street, but now known far

and wide as the Bandit Road. The Citadel was a knocked-out warehouse refitted on three levels and hung outside with garish holographies of a bunch of happy-faced, neotonic and perfectly moronic-looking globules presumably representative of planets with twinkly cocktail glasses in their little cartoon hands.

Here – in bolted-down psychosculpted surroundings that were designed to give a vague sense of the exotic while remaining utterly lifeless and bland, in xeno-ergonomic ally designed seating that tended to maim if sat in for more than a matter of minutes, under lighting conditions that gave 76.5 percent of known sentient lifeforms a cumulative migraine, and a subsonics playlist that caused instant projectile vomiting in the rest – sentient lifeforms of all kinds could drink diluted citrus cordials injected with industrial-grade ethanol, or inject synthesized chemical compounds cut with local industrial waste, or inhale smouldering vegetable wadding infused with petrochemical and carcino-genic tar. And that was just the stuff available to the DNA-based bipeds.

24

The Citadel catered predominantly for those who travelled to places like Jaris for fun: the extremely rich, the utterly ignorant, the masochistically insane, or some horrible amalgam of all three combined with the unfortunate additional penchant for repeatedly dropping the word ‘woggle’ into general conversation.

Such a clientele would of course, ordinarily, have anybody worthy of the name ‘hustler’ rubbing the hand-equivalents happily together and chortling with expectant glee – had not the Citadel Central Paolos parent company, and the sector-wide conglomerates that operated the tourist trade in general, been perfectly aware of it. They farmed this aspect of the tourist trade out to every respective planet’s Big Boys in return for a generous cut off the top – and unsanctioned attempts at hustling as such tended to attract the unwelcome attentions of large and muscular people with an interesting collection of electrical power tools.

There was nothing, however, to stop one going in there for a quiet drink, maybe while waiting for some friend or other, from out of town or off-planet, for the simple fact the Citadel was simply the easiest place to find and meet up in. And then maybe one might get talking to someone entirely else, quite by chance, and discover some common interest such as, say, Seventieth Generation *Kai* Oolonian resin-cheese boards.

And then one might recall upon a sudden that there was a documentary playing on the public net-server, that very minute, that was just packed *full* with Seventieth Generation *Kai* Oolonian resin-cheese boards. And so then this fortunate pair might just decide to go and find some convenient lodging room somewhere and watch it. And, once they were there, the discussion might drift onto other matters, and somebody might order some additional drinks sent up, and what with one thing and another there might occur a deep and meaningful and perfectly lovely interpersonal relationship lasting anything up to six or seven hours before the pair might wake up and become strangely chilly and distant with each other, giving each other their respective contact-numbers and respectively remembering important appointments for the day and then never, ever, have anything to do with each other again.

And one Jason Peter Kane knew full well how during this process, in some strange manner and without actually *hustling* in any way, shape or form, money tended to gravitate from the richer of the two to the poorer.

At the ground-floor bar he dug out his remaining plaques and counted them by touch while he surreptitiously studied his reflection in the mirrored steel back wall: something night-pale and battered and twenty-nine, a four-day growth on a battered face with dashing broken-nose accessory. It was currently a bad hair day, but that of course didn't matter for the simple reason that anyone seeing it had absolutely nothing to compare it to.

25

Ah, well, at least the teeth were pretty much all right, and the golden upper-right canine gave an engaging and slightly piratical edge to the grin.

The shades probably gave him an additional touch of mystery, but he really wore them only for himself, so he wouldn't have to look at the haunted, hunted, lost look in his own reflected eyes.

There was no way, in his tattered mismatched spacer clothing, that he could pass for a tourist, and there was no way he could pass for one of the Citadel whores, who were subcutaneously tagged in any case. So he adopted a persona that was, in a way, the perfect truth: loathing the place and everything in it but stuck here and looking for a friend.

He blew the last of his cash on something green and fluorescent with a

bit of some extruded synthetic fruit on a pole, then leant back against the bar and scanned the room with a contemptuous scowl, running his body language through the routine: ten-second sweeps of the room and then haul your head back to the start, hold the eye-equivalent of anybody clocking you for five and then smile, or flare your nostrils, or stick your tongue out, or do a little dance to show that your intentions are basically friendly – and you'd damned well better know which one was appropriate. Some years back he had made the horrible mistake of smiling at a *Fnarok* from Rensec XIV. He had been lucky to get out of it with his life.

This was all done automatically, the mind that was doing it more concerned with pegging the individuals it personally fancied – because such things communicate and increase the chances of success no end. And, if you're going to take somebody for the ride of their life, you might as well enjoy the trip. It makes it easier to deal with the sudden, crawling sense of self-loathing that can trip up even the best of us.

Across the bar a dykey-looking six-armed arachnid-woman from Glomi IV

caught him looking at her and gave him a little wave – but Jason didn't really feel up to having his internal organs pureed by force-injected gastric acids and sucked out through his urethra, which always sort of tended to spoil the afterglow.

The mobile interfacing node of a Darian septilateral *gestalt* looked slightly more interesting – except that you could never quite put the fact out of your mind that it was constantly and telepathically linked to what looked like six separate glistening membrane sacs full of pus in a darkened room somewhere.

The piglet people of Glomi VII (a tour-party of whom were gathered further up the bar, on squat little stepladders and in what looked like garish little Hawaiian shirts, drinking something yellow and having a squeaky singsong) were fun for a while, he supposed, but their conversation tended to pall. Jason turned away from them – and as he did so a piglet person trotted down his stepladder to reveal the figure beyond.

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Jason was moving before he realized it. The Citadel subsonics must have changed over or something, because he suddenly felt a kind of shaky, queasy thumping in the pit of his stomach.

The bar curved around a comer and the figure had its back to him: bipedal, female, dressed in the sort of worn fupi-leather coveralls commonly worn by the Jaris truckers' Guild, who ferried produce from the automated farms and mines – but obviously ill-fitting and originally tailored for somebody else.

Her hair was dark and cut in a razor crop. She was currently involved in an irritated argument with one of the Paolos-programmed mechanoid bar staff, waving a glassful of something green and flashing like an LED and spilling it in the process so that it ate into the counter top.

Later, recalling it, Jason could not remember thinking *anything* as he headed for her; it was something to do with her posture, her manner, a flash of instant, mindless recognition that simply wrenched him towards her, drawing him inexorably like an iron bar to an electromagnet. He walked straight through the piglet people (two of whom fell off their ladders with squeals of indignation) and brushed past a growling Citadel bouncer fully twice his height without noticing. He reached to touch the figure's shoulder babbling something incoherent even to him, and then she rounded on him, angrily, eyes flashing in her bruised and sunburnt face. And then he suddenly came back to himself and he realized, precisely, what was happening to him.

She was human.

Not humanoid, not even some being utterly indistinguishable from a human save in a thousand subtle, microscopic ways that could be registered only on the subconscious level. She was human. The world went strange and he felt as if he was going to collapse.

'Oh bloody hell,' the woman said. 'Not another one of the ghastly little buggers. Listen: 'me no wantee good time jig-jig all-same, okay? Piss off and leave me alone!'

She didn't say it in the Basic that was the *lingua franca* of the independent sectors. She said it in English. The accent was a little strange, with slightly elongated, drawling vowels and a couple of inhaled Maori-like glottal clicks thrown in for good measure; but the words hit Jason like a crateful of pig-iron anvils. He stuttered and flushed and then, with the suave and debonair charm for which he was justly notorious upon dozens of inhabited worlds, he delivered the most romantic chat-up line that the universe has ever heard:

‘Um. . . ’ he said miserably.

A hand landed on his shoulder, It had to be a hand because anything else with clawed and opposable digits like that didn’t bear thinking about. Medusoids weren’t even in it.

‘This guy bothering you?’ said the bouncer Jason had forgotten about.

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The human woman looked up at the bouncer-thing blankly, getting the better of the deal since it had four redly pulsing eyes, fifteen nostrils and several sets of jaws complete with the obligatory complement of gnashing teeth. And it was slavering.

‘Come with me,’ the bouncer-thing growled happily to Jason, ‘and see my very interesting set of electro-mechanical power-tools.’

It was at that point that there was a small disturbance at the other end of the bar. The main doors burst open with a bang, and through them came a squad of the Jaris Militia, strapped into their bulky hi-impact body armour with their reflex-trigger plasma rifles at the ready.

They cast around themselves like dogs after a scent (indeed, cops in the independent cluster over-tended to be recruited from species evolved from a canine base). Pausing only to berate one of their fellows who had momentarily taken the opportunity to cock his leg against the doorframe, they ploughed through the room, scattering the xenobiologically disparate clientele left, right and centre, heading directly for Jason Peter Kane.

Jason desperately tried to recall what he could have possibly done to merit the attentions of a whole squad while he even more desperately tried to hide behind the bouncer-thing. It was to no avail. He was locked solid in its immobile grip.

And then suddenly he was wrenched from the bouncer’s clutches, losing some leather off his jacket, a scrap of artificial fur and several layers of skin in the process.

The next thing he knew, the human woman had him in an agonizing arm-lock and was pressing something hard into the small of his back.

‘One step nearer and the grubby little chancer gets it,’ she hollered at the advancing militiamen – who couldn’t understand a word of it but got the general sense, grinding to a halt in a clattering confusion of

armaments. ‘Let’s all do the world a favour, yes?’ she continued in the same vein.

Jason groaned.

What with one thing and another, all things considered, it really hadn’t been his night.

Thirty seconds later, in a back alley, a back door burst open and two figures spilled out with a multiple crash of overturned heptagonal garbage cans.

Jason Kane landed flat on his face in a small pile of refuse, and was about to struggle spluttering to his feet when a knee in the small of his back with a fair bit of weight behind it knocked his face down into it again.

Hands patted rapidly at his body, hauled his own small gun out of his pocket and then roughly rolled him over. He looked up into the viciously smiling face of the human woman.

‘Good thing you didn’t know I didn’t really have a gun back there,’ she said happily. ‘A couple of knuckles doesn’t really feel like one, but nobody ever feels like finding out, yes?’

Jason drew a choking breath to reply, before realizing that she was talking to him absently and for the benefit of herself – in much the same way as Jason himself would sometimes talk to Shug, the little animal he kept as a pet, which was currently residing back on his ship. She didn’t expect him to understand or even respond.

Still sitting on his chest, the woman examined the little gun critically for a moment and then bounced to her feet and backed off to a safe distance, aiming the gun directly at a point between Jason’s eyes. It was as though he could feel something softly drilling into it.

‘I really hope for your sake it isn’t true what they say about the sizes being related,’ she said. ‘Be a pity that, ’cause you’re quite cute in a greasy ratty sort of way. I’ll just bet you charm the pants off all your little alien friends. Ah well.’ She shrugged. ‘ *C’est la vie.* . . . ’ And with a little ironic wave of her hand she darted off down the alley.

Jason lay back in the moldering garbage. A couple of seconds later the Jaris militia burst from the door in some irate confusion.

‘She went that way,’ he said, pointing in the opposite direction – as a matter of principle – from which the woman had taken.

The militia hounded off up the alley with happy barks, and after a while Jason climbed to his feet and ambled after them.

He was well out of it. Don’t get involved. This woman was probably some horrible hardened psychotic space criminal or something who’d blow your head off and spit down your neck as soon as look at you, and she would probably deserve everything she ultimately got.

Don’t get involved.

Forget the fact that in more than fifteen years she was the first human he had met, the first link he had ever found with home.

Thus thought Jason as he turned around and trotted off in the same general direction she had taken, in the almost entirely uncertain and entirely unacknowledged hope of ever finding her again.

Chapter Four

On the Czhanos homeworld, under an iron-grey sky, Roz Forrester and Chris Cwej marched purposely through city streets, heading towards a structure in the distance that looked something like a spaceport. Or at least Cwej did, with Forrester following behind.

The streets were perfectly straight and arranged in a grid of perfect squares.

The architecture in them seemed to be that of barracks encampments full of Nissan-like huts, fortified bunkers and gun emplacements pointing at the sky.

There seemed to be no system to their placing on ground level, but an aerial view would probably show some overall, precise and strictly enforced design.

The city itself did not seem particularly crowded – whole areas were deserted and the crowds in the rest thin on the ground. The majority of the inhabitants were probably off fighting in some war or other – this was obviously a military-based culture; there was a predominance of uniforms and those inside them moved with regimented precision.

The people here were all basically humanoid and with enough physical variation that Chris and Roz had few problems blending in. They had learnt, from listening to passing conversation, the name of the planet and that it was part of an empire, and the general situation here seemed to be something like century-zero Rome – where a native of some occupied territory might be a full citizen while a native of the capital might be a slave.

And this was a distressingly apt analogy. As well as the general run of crowds and those in uniform, there was a third caste, dressed in nothing but ragged clouts, covered in welting and scar-tissue and more often than not looking starved to death's door. Each seemed to be appended to a humanoid in uniform, serving more or less, as a second pair of hands when required and otherwise ignored. As with the other strata of this society there seemed to be no common race, species or gender to this caste, but this wasn't much help to Roz. The barracks-hut had been empty of anything other than cots, and she had been forced to wrap a discarded towel from an ablutions chamber around herself until she could find something more suitable.

And then they had left the deserted barracks camp and she had found that it was suitable enough.

Roz Forrester's DNA might have been as homogenized as that of almost any other human from her time – but her family history, like her phenotypical 31

coloration, was staunchly Afrocentric and proud. Her family legends, the stories that had informed and moulded her from birth, dealt hugely with the obscenity of human slavery – and the further obscenities, practised upon those born with a decent amount of epidermal melanin, for centuries after slavery had been ostensibly abolished.

By the thirtieth century such distinctions were all but meaningless within a galaxy that contained non-human, non-mammal and non-carbon-based sentient life, most of which didn't want humans to exist at all. But this couldn't change that cruel and bloody period of human history. And the fact that Roz had been born into a family that, by the thirtieth century, was every bit as rich and powerful as any twentieth-century clan of *emigre* Germans who owned half of the United Kingdom, was quite beside the point. That just made it worse.

As she followed Chris Cwej in a rapid but servile shuffle, she didn't know whether she wanted to vomit scream or faint. She felt befouled

and filthy on an inner level she had never even known existed before. She shook with an absolute murderous rage so strong that she felt she might explode at any minute.

Cwej's uniform seemed to denote someone of low to middle rank in one of the maintenance activities. Several humanoids in the same kind of uniform were on the streets, fixing public lanterns (or rather, directing their slaves as they did it), delivering packages of what looked like food rations (or rather, driving the haulage vehicles while their slaves did the heavy lifting), or sorting garbage into recycling skips (have a guess). The distinction between these auxiliary personnel and another type of uniform was obvious. The second sort were sloppier, rougher, obviously designed for combat – and, far from being regimented, the wearers of them comported themselves with the general reticence and decorum of squaddies on leave the whole universe over.

'We're going to have to change our stations in life,' she said to Cwej, talking in normal tones because there is nothing that draws the eye and ear so much as someone trying to hiss surreptitiously. 'We're never going to find out anything useful dressed like this. We have to get in with the real soldiers.'

Cwej ignored her. They came to an intersection and he waited for several blocky, armoured diesel trucks to go by, absently tapping the side of his neck with two fingers in the Adjudicator hand-signal for: okay, what's the plan?

'Don't you worry about that,' said Roz. 'I have an idea about that.'

Verkog and Skana were just a pair of privates in the massive and well-oiled regimental body of the Glorious Space Armies of Czhanos. They came out of the comfort station laughing and blinking in the daylight. They had been in 32

there for two standard days, using up their shore-leave bonus fairly evenly between the alkaloid bar and the slave-caste whores.

Now they had about half a standard Imperial between them and less than a *jiik* in which to spend it before the hinterland patrols picked them up for Embarkation. And just where are you going to find entertainment on a cold Czhanos morning for the equivalent of one pound fifty and in the equivalent of half an hour?

Relations of an intimate and personal nature throughout the Empires tended towards the multiple and complex, and the bond between

Skana and Verkog was closer than most marriages without being actually physical – at least not directly with each other. The nearest human equivalent would be a pair of buddies who did absolutely everything together, but on a level far deeper than the vast majority of humans could ever comprehend.

The streets around the landing fields of Czhanos were less gridlike than in the rest of the city, providing a degree of discretion for the unofficial but tacitly sanctioned service activities for the Glorious Czhanos Space Army. Verkog and Skana wandered through an alleyway, eyes and ears alert for any possibility of action that didn't *cost* anything.

'Sa dirty rotten shame.' Skana, the bigger of the two and female, had sobered up to the point where she was becoming maudlin. 'Poor old Jinzha, straight through the head with a sharpened throwing mallet. Dern and the noose of thorns and how we found Zano, Vir and Khari bloody-eagled. And what about old Sergeant Mhorev, grabbed by the shrieking ghoulies. . . '

She was referring to the recent fate of their old squad, picked off one by one in a police action on the Czhan-occupied planet of Shivri. The withdrawal of Czhanos forces to fight in the coming battle over Moriel had sparked a short but bloody revolution and guerrilla war in the planet's Ghost Marshes, killing most of the remaining occupying forces before reinforcements could be crash-rediverted to secure Shivri again and airlift the survivors out.

Verkog, the smaller and male half of the pair, dropped his empty globular drinks flask on the flagstones. It bounced.

'Where do you think they're going to send us now?' he said, with the strange lucidity of the truly drunk. 'I heard they're going to send every single trooper to the border zones. Even pull out completely from some of the colonies and retake them when we've sorted out the Dakhaari and the bastard Saloi.'

Skana thought about this, rooting around in a porcine and bristly ear with a grubby finger.

'Nah,' she said at last. 'What I heard was that Supreme Commander Koth left orders that if he doesn't come out of this Summit place in a *gik*, we hit the place with everything we've got. We'll be gearing up for that, you mark my words.'

She glanced up automatically. ‘If it is the Will of the Hollow Gods, of course.’

It was at that point that they rounded a comer of the alley to find a scrawny black-skinned female in a grubby towelling clout; obviously a slave-caste woman escaped from somewhere.

From somewhere else she had found a bucket of whitewash and a brush, and she was industriously painting a wall with a crude but recognizable graf-fito of a Glorious Army of Czhanos soldier doing something decidedly un-savoury with his ceremonial sabre, a live chicken and a coconut. The little pink tip of her tongue stuck out of the side of the slave-woman’s mouth as she worked.

‘Hoi, you!’ shouted Skana.

The slave-woman dropped her brush in shock. She jerked round to stare at the two troopers, and then backed off slowly down the alley, whimpering.

‘Y’know,’ said Verkog happily, ‘I think we’ve found our entertainment.’

They went after her.

To be fair to the two Czhanos soldiers, it must be said that certain things that squaddies are notorious for doing when confronted by something female, terrified and apparently defenceless never crossed their minds. They were merely going to beat the slave-woman to death extremely brutally. As Skana ran she glanced across to shout something encouraging to Verkog – and found that he was no longer there.

And then something black-skinned and scrawny and female was upon her, roaring with an absolute and chilling rage, ducking under Skana’s shocked attempts at defence and straight-arming her in the face to break her snoutlike nose.

As the soldier’s head jerked back spraying blood, the slave-woman rammed a fist into her stomach, doubling her over forward again with a *whuff!* of expelled air – just in time for her to run right into a devastating uppercut to the chin.

And then Skana was on the flagstones, the slave woman sitting on her belly (between the second and third sets of lactating glands), pinning her arms down with her knees and raining an unending series of edge-

of-the-hand slaps about her face and neck.

The last thing Skana saw before she lost consciousness was an auxiliary-uniformed figure standing over her, clutching the limp form of Verkog in one hand and saying: ‘Uh, Roz, you *really* don’t have to kill her. . . ’

Chapter Five

In the privacy of his own quarters in the Saloi quadrant of the Summit, Sareth attended to the surveillance consoles that his personal staff had set up upon arrival. To an Earthman they would seem like an arcane and possibly ridiculous collection of rudimentary electrical components and extremely delicate, complicated clockwork – but this was simply because mechanical clockwork was the technology that in the Three Empires had evolved. It was the same process that had an extremely powerful microelectronic Artificial Intelligence on Earth still plugged into a primitive mechanical wall switch, but it had taken a slightly different path.

Sareth spent almost a *jiik* sorting out the cluster of peripherals that only he knew how to hook up properly – because there are certain constants in information technology no matter what it’s based upon. He then wound up the clockwork and watched closely as the high-definition pinboard screens came to life.

Several of the screens showed tactical readouts from the border zones, detailing the movements of the Saloi forces and extrapolating the movements of their enemies from available sensory data. Sareth had ordered heavy-duty transmitters to force-beam this data through the Summit’s defensive field and it was coming through clearly.

Possibly rather too clearly. Sareth made a mental note not to trust these readings entirely.

Another screen showed output from the Summit itself. Visual and aural data gathered from the automata who attended the talks and then broadcast to each Empire to make of what they would. These were of the nature of official communiqués, sanctioned by the Hollow Gods, and there were whole buildings full of propagandists back on the Saloi homeworld to handle the slanting and the distribution.

The screen currently showed the Opening Ceremonies, from which Sareth had slipped discreetly away, better to observe and coordinate

the forces of his Administrator. They had reached the point of the Exchanging of Gifts.

The Czhan and the Dakhaar had respectively given the Saloi leader a ceremonial sabre and a club with a nail in it, each receiving in turn a ritual Athame. The enemy leaders took their gifts with a little tentative shudder, as though some poisoned needle mechanism might spring out and plunge into 35

their hands (this had been discussed) – but they had evidently decided that the Saloi would not be quite as blatant as that (this had also been discussed, as the basis for a possible double bluff). Sareth believed that the ritual Athames were probably as safe as any weapon can in fact be, but he couldn't be sure.

Sareth turned his attention to a third and rather larger screen. This could be switched among the outputs from several hundred miniature flying receivers, little larger than rotifer-insects, which he had released upon entering the Summit. Sareth had designed these little bugs personally and they were, he felt, the only sources of information he could truly trust.

He activated the optics and auditory systems of one that was currently whin-ing through the ceremonial dome, and was still at this point relaying more or less the same scene as the official broadcasts.

Gifts exchanged, the Ceremonies had reached the stage of the Trading of Insults. This was a diplomatic device probably rooted in prehistoric times, when tribes encountering each other would initially trade amiable boasts of their respective prowess as opposed to simply fighting there and then. It was from a time when people might be killed in war – but war itself was regarded as a kind of contact sport. A more honest time, Sareth thought, a little wistfully in the privacy of his head. A time when issues were decided face to face with blood and steel, rather than some cold and calculated game of strategy and counterstrategy played with the lives of invisible millions.

On the screen, wavering a little as the little receiver-rotifer: vas buffeted slightly by convection, Queen Ravla was saying: '. . . and wind'em round a stick, you betcha.'

'And *we* will raze your filthy camp to the ground,' Commander Koth replied courteously. 'And slay your women, children and babes in arms. We will burn their bodies and boil away their blood for salt, and seed your lands with salt and ashes so that none of your unholy kind

may ever rise again.'

'And we, in turn,' said Morweth, 'shall make to strangle each and every one of your malignant brats e'en in the womb by the judicious application of. . . '

The speeches completed their ritual cycles, leading at last and inexorably to the Ritual of the Turning Round and Storming off In Different Directions.

The leaders and their retinues marched from the ceremonial dome each back to their respective quarters – leaving only the little man, the Doctor, who had all this time stood to one side and calmly observed the proceedings.

The Doctor now glanced thoughtfully from one set of doors to another, to the other.

'"Curiouser and curiouser,"' he mused. 'Or should that be, *I'm ready for my closeup, Mr Dodgson*?' He frowned. Squabbling like children one second, acting in perfect unison the next.' He shrugged. 'Ah, well.'

The Doctor wandered over to his strange blue cabinet and leant against it, 36

pulling a small and strangely shaped sliver of some liquid-looking metal from a trouser pocket, tapping it absently against his lips, lost in contemplation.

Then he glanced up. It was entirely Sareth's imagination, but for a moment, it seemed that the little man was looking directly out of the screen at him.

'It certainly presents a rather interesting dichotomy doesn't it?' the Doctor said.

Unaccountably uneasy, Sareth decided to check on some of the other receivers scattered through the Summit, starting with the one he had assigned to follow Koth. He flicked the little electrical gate on his console.

The screen went blank.

Sareth cursed and flicked to another receiver. Blank. And blank. And blank and blank and blank.

At last, with something like desperation, Sareth switched back to his original choice.

The Doctor still stood there, leaning back against his blue cabinet, seemingly still lost in thought.

There was a knock on the door. With a suppressed curse – for it would not do to give anyone outside some clue as to his true state of mind – Sareth crossed to the door and smoothly pulled it open.

'I believe these are yours?' The Doctor held up a big strip of sticky paper, to which were stuck hundreds of rotifer-like miniature receivers.

He peered up at Sareth's face with bright and innocent eyes. 'You look like a man who knows things. Do you mind if we have a small chat?'

Marco sa G'hanz was one of the troopers left to secure the Czhanos quadrant of the Summit, while Koth and his retinue headed for the ceremonial centre.

He was tough and combat-hardened, as were all who had been taken along for these talks, and he had seen action on innumerable bloody police operations throughout the Czhanos Empire.

Marco's most recent tour of active service had been in the crystalline forests of Anrici IV, where the aboriginals were silicate in nature and to Czhanos eyes as clear as glass. Even now, he found himself starting at shadows, the minuscule warps of vision that come from the simple shift of air molecules, the tiny half-glimpsed movements of detached cells floating inside the eyes.

And this was why, as he stood guard in a corridor that led back towards the Czhanos battleship, he failed to notice a panel in the corridor sliding smoothly back. This overt movement overloaded his too-fine-tuned reactions so that, for a split-moment, he failed to recognize it as such.

And when he did notice it and spun to face the hole in the wall, bringing up his impact-rifle with a cry, it was already too late.

Because something was already coming out of it.

* * *

‘Doctor,’ Sareth said, hoping to the Hollow Gods that he sounded suave and relaxed. ‘This is indeed an unexpected pleasure. I would very much like to hear how you did it.’

‘It s Just a little trick I do at parties.’ The Doctor stepped over the threshold and handed Sareth the bug-encrusted flypaper. ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t want me to betray all my secrets. I d be drummed out of the Magic Circle for one thing, and there are things out there, in the dark.’

The little mismatched man suddenly clapped his hands together and looked around Sareth’s quarters with interest. ‘Very ascetic. Very spartan. I don’t know why but I expected something a little more, um. . . ’

‘Sybaritic?’ said Sareth, a trifle sardonically.

‘Opulent, yes. I rather gathered from what others have said that the Saloi might be renowned for pleasures in the more sophisticated areas.’

‘Pleasures can only be fully experienced in the proper time and place,’

Sareth said. “The thing that raises us above animals is that we are capable of controlling our pleasures.’ He gestured about the chamber, at his cot, his table, his bare walls, at his consoles. ‘This is where I perform a specific function. I have other rooms set aside for me, elsewhere, should I decide to feel the need.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘Control and moderation in all things?’

‘Precisely. And this room serves my current needs quite adequately.’

Sareth crossed to the table and picked up the decanter of water resting upon it, all the while considering the various poisons secreted in his rings – and the other substances that were not exactly poisons. ‘Would you care to. . . ?’

‘I think,’ said the Doctor carefully, ‘that this would not be a particularly good idea at this point.’

‘As you wish.’ Sareth laid the decanter down and turned to face the little man again. ‘Now, precisely what, Doctor, can I do for you?’

The Time Lord crossed to the single chair before Sareth’s consoles and turned it round with a scrape of its feet on the hard, bare floor. He sat down on it and primly folded his hands on his lap.

‘I need information,’ he said,

‘I think,’ said Sareth, ‘that you should be asking my Administrator for such things. I’m sure you wouldn’t expect me to betray my people just like that.’

‘Oh we’ll get around to that,’ the Doctor said. ‘Don’t you worry about it.’

For a moment Sareth couldn’t decide whether the Doctor would get around to talking to Morweth or whether *he*, Sareth, would get around to betraying his people. There was something about the Time Lord’s matter-of-fact tone that sent a shudder through him. He tried to glance casually away from the Time Lord’s eyes, and found that he could not.

And now the Doctor’s eyes seemed suddenly very cold, cold as the spaces between the stars; and as Sareth looked into them he knew with a certainty every bit as cold that if the Doctor were to ask him anything – anything – he would find himself answering with the absolute truth.

‘Just tell me things in general,’ the Doctor said. ‘I can’t function in a vacuum.

Not in that particular sense of the word, anyway. What are the reasons behind this war? Just why are you, the Dakhaari and the Czhans at each other’s throats?’

For no reason he could name, Sareth felt a sudden plunge into relief.

‘We always have been,’ he said. ‘That’s all there is. Oh, there are *reasons*, thousands of them through the ages and all of them ultimately contradictory.

Each of us has decimated or been decimated by another at some time; each of us has been enslaved. When you boil the flesh off the skull, it comes to the simple fact that we have always hated.’

‘A kind of equipoise of negativity,’ the Doctor mused, seemingly to himself He turned his attention to Sareth again. ‘And what have these so-called Hollow Gods to do with this?’

Sareth was momentarily taken aback. He hoped it didn’t show. The Time Lord might as well have asked what part air played in breathing,

or water in thirst.

‘Everything we do, everything we might ever do,’ he said, ‘is done under the Hollow Gods. They’ve always been here. Everywhere. They can take people away without trace and They can kill suns. They make Their wishes known and we fulfil them. They make Their dislikes known and we forbid them.

Utterly and without question. Only under Them are we free.’

Even talking about the Hollow Gods, he found his hands and head going into the motions of supplication – the motions he had gone through all his life. He found himself shaking with the deep and absolute and unquestioning terror that he had lived with ever since he had been old enough to name it.

And then he stopped. Just like that.

The Doctor was looking at him again. But this time there was something else in his eyes. A kind of rage, hotter than suns but perfectly, absolutely, under a control that not even the Saloi could aspire to. And there was something that was just as immense. It would be later, years later, before Sareth could even begin to give it a name. Even then he would think of it as pity before he realized that it was more a kind of anguish that was big enough to take in the entire universe.

‘I think I understand. Your Hollow Gods *smite*. You worship as immediate survival reflex rather than a purely culturally evolved behavioural pattern.’

For a moment the Doctor looked away. And then he looked back.

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‘I rather think,’ he said, ‘that I might have been called here to deal with the wrong problem entirely.’

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Chapter Six

Benny trotted through a maze of cobbled alleys winding through the sheet-metal edifices of what looked like warehouses and the ramshackle adobe backsides of the smaller buildings sandwiched in between. Occasionally lights and the sounds of merriment came from

these, but for the most part darkness and silence reigned. Those who didn't stay up all night presumably went to bed early with a soothing milky drink.

The lamps of the main streets were periodically visible, but Benny thought it was probably best if she stuck to the alleys. Over the last few hours, or whatever the local equivalent was, things had tended from the not so good to the worse.

After waiting a couple of hours by the roadside, Benny had been picked up by what she supposed she had to call a 'truck'. It seemed to be powered by some form of internal combustion, but instead of rolling on wheels it appeared to shuffle on a series of stumpy legs at speeds approaching two hundred kilo-metres per hour.

In construction the vehicle consisted of a churning engine to the front and a cab to the rear connected by an extremely long, narrow flatbed to which were tethered, by stout lengths of cable, several hundred of the animals she had called foops – monstrously bloated and floating and jostling together like a bunch of indignant-looking helium-inflated balloons.

The truck was driven by a large and furry ursine humanoid that reminded Benny of the Reklonians she had once met, some time before, in a somewhat diminutive, slightly bizarre and on the whole rather silly set of supplementary dimensions. This driver had grunted at her to come aboard, in a language that had served to fix her position in space and time to some degree. It was an early root-form of the Galactic Basic used by non-humans in her own time and originating from what would come to be known as the Dagellan Cluster. This put her somewhere between what on Earth would be the thirteenth and twenty-second centuries, some time before humanity had made it to any extent to the stars.

Recognizing a language, however, was a far cry from being able to understand a word of it – and this had worried Benny a lot. Wherever and whenever she had travelled with the Doctor, the Time Lord had exerted some form of psionic influence that had translated every language with which they had 41

come into contact. She had no idea whether this was due to the Doctor himself or some secondary function of the TARDIS. . . , but if this was no longer the case then that meant she was cut off from them both.

Also, as she had racked her brain for information about the Dagellan Cluster at this time, she had been a little ashamed to realize how *anthrocentric* her knowledge was, without the Doctor on hand to derail and constantly correct it.

In this timeframe – save for the very highest levels of Earth government and the classified activities of UNIT – human contact with alien races had been practically nonexistent. It was only when humans themselves had made it to the stars that the cultures of other lifeforms had been deemed worthy of study and research, and all Benny could currently remember of the Dagellan Cluster was that there were a couple of big empires fighting each other, or something, which didn't exactly help much, since you could say that about almost anywhere, any time, ever.

Other things, though, were evidently the same the whole galaxy over. After about half an hour of driving across the now dark and featureless plain, the bearlike driver had suddenly and extremely roughly tried it on. Sensing that the language barrier might prove any verbal deterrent a waste of time, Benny had simply belted him unconscious and booted him out of the cab – removing his clothing beforehand, because the ice-cold night wind whistling through the hatch told her that it might be an idea to wrap up warm. A twinge of conscience had her wondering uneasily if the driver would freeze to death despite his fur, but that hadn't stopped her from cutting down the leather jacket and trews to roughly her size, with the serrated knife that the driver had held to her throat.

It was after that, naturally enough, that things had started to go seriously wrong.

An hour or so after losing the driver, Benny saw lights through the forward portholes of the cab, half obscured by the engine up front and the globular bulks of inflated foops, but growing discernibly closer. A klaxon sounded in the cab and several mechanical readouts started waving frantic little painted wooden flags. Evidently some response was called for here, so she pulled on the only obvious control she could find, a joystick-like lever hanging from a gimbal in the ceiling.

The truck speeded up.

It seemed to be a stockyard terminus of the general sort used by rail vehicles half a galaxy away. Fortunately it was largely automated, so when the truck hit it at something more than twice its normal cruising speed there were few casualties and no fatalities, save for a number of

inflated foops who burst on impact with the buffers. Plus of course the several hundred other foops, who 42

exploded when the methane released by the first few was ignited by the sparks from a shattered electrical filament-lamp.

Fortunately for Benny, even a huge methane explosion releases relatively little thermal and kinetic energy unless it's under pressure. The remains of the cab were knocked flying by the detonative spray of suddenly disembodied foop-related items and thrown tumbling through some fifty metres and several partition walls. But she had come out of it merely bruised and slightly scorched and with little other damage.

She had wrenched open what had to be an emergency hatch to find herself in a concourse filled with heavy packing machinery. Several creatures of assorted alien physiology were converging on her, gabbling confusedly and irately in the same tongue-equivalent used by the truck-driver – which she still couldn't understand but somehow she didn't think they were shouting 'happy birthday'.

Benny had momentarily debated with herself the pros and cons of attempting to open friendly dialogue, and then decided that it would probably be the best for all concerned if she just legged it.

She had made it out onto the settlement streets, and after a slightly tortuous detour through the back alleys she had come to what even to the untrained eye must have been the local equivalent of a bar. The streets were deserted –

she stood out in them like an inflamed opposable grasping digit – and if there was still some pursuit it would be easier to try to hide from it in a place where there were for want of a better word, people.

And, of course, this had not been such a good idea.

Now, back in the back alleys, she wondered where else she could possibly go. The bar she had escaped from had obviously been some kind of central meeting space and designed to accommodate an extremely wide number of species – but it had still been like Breughel's worst nightmare with added sick-building syndrome. It had contained recognizable elements of 'barriness', but on some subliminal level it was like nothing she had ever encountered before, incomprehensible in a thousand little but deeply disturbing ways. She didn't even have the box for the cultural toolkit; she simply didn't know the score.

And, if that was what something built for maximum accessibility was like, how would she fare in some more exotic and specialized place? Forget about trusting the water; how does one know if drinking it without the correct and complicated rituals, or even drinking it at all, is a killing insult?

And speaking of water, she hadn't drunk anything since the drinking pool on the plains (the mug of seething acetone she had been given in the bar didn't count).

She was shaking, not from the cold, which she couldn't yet feel, but from the pulsing fever of sunstroke and dehydration. And to make matters worse –

in the paradoxical way that such things occur – the water she had drunk all those hours ago was insistently making itself known.

Well, this is where you really find out what you're made of Benny, she thought; how you do when you're well and truly outside your own personal matrix with no Time Lord assistance to help you deal with it. And the answer is: not very well, actually.

It was at that point, as she passed through a pool of light from what looked like a dim and elderly halogen lamp bolted to the wall, that she heard the scrape of boots on cobbles behind her in the dark.

Benny stopped shaking and felt herself go very cold and still.

Then she turned, in an alert crouch, calling on the mindless mind-set she had learnt when drafted briefly into Earth Force Academy during the Dalek Wars, automatically reaching for the serrated knife she had taken from the truck-driver. The little toy gun she had taken from the ratty humanoid in the bar wasn't worthy of even subconscious consideration; she was preparing to fight for her life.

Something moved, minimally, in the darkness.

'You'd better come out, now,' Benny said very softly, with that slightly dreamy calm that could send a shudder through anything with a human nervous system – and praying to *God* that the words and tone weren't some alien equivalent of 'My name's Dinner, please jump on me and squish me with your horrible big hydraulic claws!'

There was a little squeak of something like terror in the darkness –

although, of course, a little squeak of something like terror probably meant, ‘Hello, Dinner!’ in these parts.

And then, very slowly, a shape came forward.

It was the ratty humanoid from the bar, grinning nervously and making it perfectly clear that he wasn’t about to do anything with his horrible hydraulic any things, if he had them, which he didn’t.

Benny heaved a small sigh of relief.

‘You again?’ she said, rather less menacingly than she had intended – and in fact, she later realized, with something like the mock-severe exasperation she sometimes used on Wolsey the cat. ‘What do you want now?’

The humanoid, still grinning nervously, did a little turtle-duck with his head and looked at her with politely inquiring eyes. Maybe it was the association with cats, but there was definitely something not a little engaging about him.

Something of the ‘you can trust me just about as far as you can throw me, but you gotta like me all the same’. He didn’t seem to be any immediate threat.

‘Fnerk?’ he said.

‘Wonderful,’ said Benny. Oh, what the hell, she thought. ‘I don’t suppose you’d know where I can get something hot inside me? I can’t believe I just 44

said that. I mean something to eat. Something to drink?’ She pantomimed forking food into her mouth.

The humanoid beamed and wiggled his eyebrows. ‘Furpy-snuck-snuck?’ he said hopefully, and then did a little pantomime of his own that was instantly recognizable, and similar to Benny’s, but involved the oral ingestion of something quite other than food. He nodded vigorously and then bounded towards her happily.

‘No!’ Benny said firmly, pushing him away. ‘Food. I want *food*.’ She repeated her own pantomime with rather more pointed precision.

‘Mogo.’ The humanoid shrugged. He stuck a hand into the pocket of what looked like worn black denim jeans and pulled out a couple of small bonelike plaques. He showed them to Benny meaningfully and

dispiritedly.

‘Oh, I get you,’ she said. ‘You need money for that. You need money in general. Well, I’m afraid I haven’t got any, chum.’

Possibly sensing her tone, the humanoid put his own obviously limited funds away and shrugged again as though to express that things were hard all over. As it were. He didn’t seem to mind, and he didn’t seem about to leave.

Benny would be the last person to call herself tactile – but for some reason, before she quite knew what she was doing, she found herself reaching tentatively out to touch the alien humanoid. She had always been a sucker for strays, and it was as though she just wanted, on some automatic level, to pet him as she would a friendly dog.

The humanoid alien took the hand with one of his own, and gently pressed it to his happily smiling face.

And Benny felt something inside her melt.

It was nothing major; it was no big deal. It was like the mammalian pleasure one gets when one strokes cat’s fur crossed with a little of that blessed relaxation that comes from simply being with your lover; feeling that your bodies fit, knowing implicitly that your thoughts are perfectly in tune. It was that state of being that just seems so natural that you accept it as a matter of course – until, of course, it all goes away and you spend the rest of your life worrying at your memories of it like a dog with an ancient and desiccated bone, and desperately trying to recapture the marrow of it.

Benny pulled her hand away sharply.

‘You’re doing that on *purpose*, you cheeky little sod!’ she snapped angrily.

‘Is that what you do? With your mind? With pheromones and stuff?’

The humanoid alien looked at her blankly.

‘I’ll bet you don’t look like that at all, really,’ Benny said. ‘You’re some elementary form of empathic metamorph or something – and that’s what gives you away. You look like a human and you act like an approximation of one, 45

but your every little nuance speaks of otherness. Believe me, I know

about aliens pretending to be human, and –'

She broke off as an extremely, extremely horrible thought struck her.

'If that's you,' she said with such a cold and murderous fury that the humanoid alien skittered back in alarm. 'If that's you running one of your little scams in the aid of God knows what, I'm going to take that bloody umbrella and shove it so far up your. . . '

The humanoid grabbed hold of her and slammed her back against the alley wall. Benny was in the process of going for her knife again, when she heard an approaching yelping and jackbooted scampering over cobbles, and saw that the humanoid alien was staring at her with a kind of terrified pleading.

After a while a squad of armed and body-armoured canine creatures stormed past. Benny could only assume that the scents of the humanoid and her were basically incompatible with their olfactory organs.

Slightly later, when the sounds had receded, she broke away from their mutual clutch – with a slight degree of reluctance because, she found, she was rather enjoying it in spite of herself.

'Well, I can't stand around here all night,' she said briskly. 'It might just be me, but I don't think this planet's exactly friendly. I really think it's time I got off it and tried to find the TARDIS.

'Problem is,' she continued thoughtfully to herself, 'that's easier said than done when you're potless and you can't speak the language. I can't buy my passage out;' I couldn't bluff my way onto a ship even if I knew where the hell it was going and I couldn't –'

She became aware that her humanoid alien friend was gesticulating frantically for her attention, waving at her, waving rapidly at himself and then pointing at the air and going, 'Fwoosh!'

The Jaris Militia had easily tracked the alien female responsible for the destruction in the Sector Fifteen Terminus to the Citadel nightclub by way of the security kinematographs positioned in the streets and in the club itself, but had subsequently lost her in the back alleys. Squads were even now combing the settlement with trained sniffer pygmies in the hope of finding her again –

but a certain Captain Acha d'Fogh had had other ideas.

Sitting in his office in Militia Central Headquarters (Jaris Alien Counter-Intelligence Detecting Division) he had played and replayed the perforated paper rolls of the Citadel footage – and then started suddenly from the mechanical pinboard monitor in inspiration.

'Why, I do believe that this "hostage" is of the precise same species!' he exclaimed. 'One can tell it by his generally sneaky and unwholesome demeanour. This is some foul and cowardly interplanetary conspiracy, no doubt 46

intended to sabotage the fupi industry of our entire planet. And the so-called hostage, far from being merely some innocent and luckless bystander, is in fact the saboteur's contact and the evil mastermind of the entire fiendish scheme!

‘But they shall not succeed!’ Captain d’Fogh planted two dogly paws on the ground and, pausing only to snap a smart salute towards the flag of the Jaris system tacked to the wall and whistle a few bars of the planetary an-them, blew into his official speaking tube, ordered a close watch to be set on the spaceport, jammed his special detecting hat on his bulldog-like head and bounded out into the night.

Off to one side, in the middle distance, massive automated ships perpetually rose and fell towards and from the barely perceptible pinpoints in the sky that were probably orbital stations. This section of the spaceport, however, seemed to be dormant.

Under the dim and sporadic glow of neglected and malfunctioning spotlights huddled the battered hulks of vessels, their hulls pitted with oxidization and the effects of other and far more inimical environments. The engine units of the ships were linked by snakes of cable to charging units bolted to the landing field and giving out a jagged-edged, composite and cumulatively irritating hum.

Benny recollected that the star systems of the Dagellan Cluster were in-terlinked by a three-dimensional latticework of standing electro gravitational fields, along which ships crawled via a relatively low-energy and low-maintenance process, more or less analogous to vehicles driving along a network of roads. The standing fields didn’t extend out into the galaxy at large, and to travel intergalactic distances at this time (to carry the Earth-based analogy a little further) was the general equivalent of crossing the Atlantic in a sailing ship. She really hoped the Doctor and the TARDIS were somewhere in the Cluster.

And, as the humanoid alien led her through the hulks, she hoped the Doctor and the TARDIS were somewhere close. The equivalent of vehicles travelling on a road might be all very well if you have a Ferrari or a big pink Cadillac, but the way the alien had avoided the entry points to the field and taken her in through a gap in the fence that encircled it told her, somehow, that something fast and sleek and a magnet for the babes wasn’t in fact going to be an option.

Now he peeped cautiously round a charging unit, beckoned her onward and then stood at last, proudly, pointing at what lay beyond.

It was the equivalent of a 1972 Ford Granada, as acquired sometime around 1996. Why wasn’t she surprised? Benny looked at the patches and the dents and tried to decide if the communications antennae

were really straightened-out coathangers.

47

The fact that it was roughly the size of a Boeing 727 only made matters worse, since that just meant there was more of it to look at. It sat on three treadless shock-absorbers and one of the engines seemed to be completely missing.

'And that's it, is it?' she said.

'Fwoosh,' said the humanoid alien happily. He shrugged and waggled a hand. 'Ka-splutasplut-a-splor, sometimes, admittedly.'

'What?' said Benny sharply. 'What did you say?'

' *T'zhomtiiines aghiti-dhlee*,' said the humanoid alien with an alien grin and a convoluted alien gesture.

He strolled over to the ship and opened a small maintenance hatch, came back with a complicated and delicate tool and a decidedly uncomplicated crowbar, used the latter to heave off a cover plate on the charging unit and then gently probed at the mechanism within. The hum from the charger increased in intensity; external readouts flickered and brightened on the skin of the ship.

'Don't tell me,' said Benny, who could teach a degree course in the comparative differentiation between raptorian avine predators and timber-related truncatory implements, when the prevailing convective air-current was southerly; 'let me guess. That normally costs money and you're short-ing it out, right?'

The humanoid alien took her by the arm and hustled her urgently towards the ship, wrenched open an airlock hatch and shoved her inside, into a dark and cramped cockpit-space. Benny smelt the familiar locker room/urinal smell of spaceships – but with some horrible additional odour that was all its own.

The humanoid alien shoved past her into the darkness and, after a couple of bumps and thumps and humanoid alien curses, she heard a small but multiple and complex click and the lights came on.

She was staring into the three mad eyes of something small and ragged and furry, half again the size but with the general proportions of a cat.

It hissed at her, baring sharp little needle-teeth – and then streaked across the cabin to where the alien humanoid was sitting in an acceleration couch before a control console. It scooted under his legs and regarded Benny with vicious, wary, triocular spite.

The air was throbbing and humming as the engines of the ship warmed up.

The humanoid alien peered at a pulsing oval readout, then turned to Benny and gestured frantically at the hatch.

Benny turned to look through it – just in time to see the dark and flashlight-toting figures of this planet's cops appear from between a couple of ships, 48

all armed to the canine teeth save one, who seemed to be wearing a kind of flappy raincoat and a trilby.

'Oh, damn it!' Benny slapped frantically at the controls beside the outer hatch and it slammed shut just as the first blaster charge hit it.

D'Fogh arrived at the landing field at the same time as a squad of ordinary foot Militia (the Bandit Road Bouncers), who were excitedly making for a hole in the perimeter fence.

'They slipped in bare minutes ago, *sah*,' barked the sergeant in charge, grinding to a saluting halt so that the other militiamen piled into him in some confusion and fell over. 'Heading for the low-rent berths and being very sneaky about it, too, precisely as per your suspicions. I've alerted all reinforcements in the area by electrical radiophone.'

'Good work, sergeant,' said Captain d'Fogh. 'Carry on – and I can only pray to the Hollow Gods that we are in time!'

With the good captain in the vanguard, the squad milled through the field, trying to pick up the scent. Presently they heard the unmistakable sounds of a ship charging up, and pelted towards its source.

The ship – a particularly disreputable trading scow of the sort favoured by il-legal immigrants, slavers, drug-smugglers and similar undesirables – throbbed and juddered as its capacitors accumulated. An eager young militiaman managed to get off a shot just as the hatch slammed shut, fusing it to the hull.

Several others followed suit, strafing the ship with blaster fire.

Captain d'Fogh pulled his detective-issue revolver from his trenchcoat and brandished it heroically. 'Don't let them get away! Aim for the engines!

Sergeant, take a man around the rear!'

He became aware that the sergeant, a wiry and terrier-like canine whose thin frame seemed almost comically lost inside his bulky body armour, was looking off somewhere to the left, his fur bristling with horrified shock.

'Um, captain,' he said quietly. 'I think you'd better take a look over there and. . . '

As the concussion of hostile gunfire slammed into the superstructure, Benny flung herself across the control cabin to where the humanoid alien was desperately flicking gate-switches and intermittently belting the hell out of recal-citrant control panels. The little creature by his side tried to bite her.

'I don't know how long you think we've got,' Benny shouted over the noise,

'but I really think you'd better –'

Abruptly, the impacts outside stopped. The sudden cessation was like a plunge into silence, before you registered the ambient accumulating throb of the accumulators again.

49

'What's happening?' Benny peered at the bank of static-hazed screens that were relaying the scene outside from several different angles. The figures of the canine cops were standing stock still, rooted to the spot, staring at a gap between two nearby ships.

And then two new figures appeared.

They were big: twice the size of even the most strapping and heavily muscled human man. They were bipedal, each lurching on hydraulic limbs that in turn supported a torso seemingly a mass of churning pistons and gears with slablike, simian arms of some matte and pitted metallic substance, one terminating in a complex manipulatory claw, the other in a cavernous tube that could only be a blaster of some kind.

Dazzling, eye-torturing light blazed in their tiny heads as they advanced, inexorably, upon the terrified canine cops.

Chapter Seven

'Well, you didn't have to be so rough,' said Chris Cwej, rubbing a little fussily at the bloodstains on his combat jacket as they walked on through the iron streets.

'I needed to work out a bit of aggression,' said Roz, hunched sullenly in the rather more pristine gear of the smaller Czhan that Chris had disabled.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'I didn't do that much. Couple of black eyes, a bloody snout and a broken arm. The thing'll be out of whatever they use for casualty in no time.'

'She,' said Chris.

'What?'

'She was female. Didn't you notice when we got the clothes? It isn't hard to tell with a humanoid. I certainly can, now I'm wearing them.'

'Yeah, well, whatever.'

They had left the luckless squaddies tied up in the equivalent of a skip further up the alley and they were now on a main street again, still heading in the general direction of the spaceport.

Clothes make the man, as it were, and now Chris was noticing that the slightly but increasingly heavier crowds – those in uniform and those without – were treating the pair of them with a new kind of respect, moving and in some cases leaping sharply aside to let them pass. But it was an uneasy kind of respect, as though the population saw them as a couple of large and possibly hungry tigers that might spring at any moment.

He also became aware that, now that he could see her face, Roz was looking at him strangely. With a kind of scorn.

'It doesn't get to you at all, does it?' she said.

'What?' said Chris, honestly puzzled. 'What doesn't get to me?'

‘All this.’ Roz gestured angrily across the street to where a uniformed sew-erage ‘worker’ was swatting at a slave too slow to get down the hole in the flagstone paving. ‘It’s inhuman.’

Chris thought about it, then shrugged. ‘Well, it’s their culture. I suppose everybody goes through it at some point. You shouldn’t feel guilty about it.’

‘ *What*?’ Roz shouted incredulously. People looked around – and then looked away incredibly quickly when they saw the big combat-active soldier with blood on his jacket and his angry comrade.

51

‘You shouldn’t feel guilty,’ Chris said again. ‘Everybody’s done it at some point. Look at the Picts and the Scots. Look at the Apaches and anybody else they met, when they got the chance. Look at some of the stuff we saw when the Angles went up against the Saxon encroachments, that time when the Doctor took us back.

‘I mean’ – he shrugged again – ‘my own family were Indentured Chattels in the twenty-seven and twenty-eight hundreds for that matter. My antecedents, anyway. The New Earth Feudalism.’

He hoped he sounded as though it didn’t matter. Because it really didn’t.

Not to him. Not any more.

‘That’s not the same thing,’ snapped Roz. ‘I suppose I shouldn’t expect you to understand.’

‘Probably not,’ said Chris easily, still hoping like hell he sounded as if it didn’t matter. ‘The New Feudalists laid the foundations for the social structures of today – our own time, I mean – so that means your illustrious family were right up there on top. You probably owned the lot of us, and things still haven’t changed all that much.’

‘You leave my family out of it,’ Roz said shortly. ‘I swore into the Adjudicators to get away from all that.’

‘Yeah, well, the next time my dad’s Church of Adjudication pension won’t stretch to the rent, maybe I can get you to have a word with your great uncle.

I understand he owns freehold on the flat, the citadel it’s in and half

the actual *landmass* it's floating over. Maybe you could ask him to do something about the waste disposal systems while you're about it. Like install some.'

He watched, with the amusement that was the nearest he could ever get to malice, as Roz tried and failed to come up with a snappy answer for that one.

'Okay,' she said at last. 'Yesterday's beaten underdog is tomorrow's loathsome overlord. Hate the crime, not the criminal. Hate the sin and not the sinner. Happy now?'

'I would be if I had the faintest idea of what you're talking about,' said Chris. 'I just wanted to let you know that, if I don't feel bitter, you shouldn't feel guilty. Stuff happens.'

Roz became thoughtful for a moment. 'So, okay, think on this. Wherever we've been with the Doctor and Benny, there's always been something we've had to do. There's always been something we've had to make happen, or find out about, or stop in its tracks, right?'

'Right,' said Chris. 'So maybe it's this.'

'That's certainly a point,' said Chris. 'Any suggestions?'

Any suggestions that Roz Forrester might have had suddenly became moot –

because at that point a big armoured truck screeched to a halt beside them, 52

and out of it came the biggest, body-armoured, helmeted Czhan they had ever seen.

Its tusks were about a foot long. It carried a huge blaster weapon, which wasn't pointing at them, but it wasn't exactly pointing away from them either.

'You!' it roared. 'Identification!'

Roz and Chris fumbled through their pockets and eventually handed over two slightly ragged pasteboard cards, hoping that they had hit upon the right items.

The massive Czhan read them. It handed them back. It didn't seem to notice that there were certain discrepancies between the people the

cards presumably described and the people in the uniforms.

‘1934-2675-0473 Verkog and 1934-2675-0481 Skana!’ it roared. ‘You two *jiiks* late for Embarkation! Fifteen hundred *jiiks* jankers! Get in truck!’

Chris was going to make a snappy comeback – just to get everyone off on the right friendly footing – but then he looked up into the big Czhan’s visor and decided that this would be a very, very bad idea indeed.

They got in the truck.

Chapter Eight

In the Summit, now that the preliminaries were taken care of, the various factions began to settle in, transferring furniture, ornamentation, personal belongings and other movables from their ships.

Now, in the Dakhaari quadrant, Ravla reclined upon an ottoman, idly and pensively watching a pair of naked lower-caste fighting males while further males with oiled muscles and in laplaps dropped bits of succulent iced *oogli* fruit into her mouth.

Flaming brands guttered on the walls of her chamber and the floor was piled with carpets. Scattered fetishes of bone and feather and hair provided a degree of protection from any evil spirits that might be in the vicinity. These were interspersed with a series of ancient and mummified shrunken corpses, with appropriate totems marked on their foreheads, for any slightly more friendly spirits to inhabit and animate.

There were whole Dakhaari industries devoted to the mass-production of these things – and they now had roughly the same amount of cultural significance as polyvinyl tinsel and an artificial tree compared with freshly cut mistletoe and a Winter Solstice yule log – but given Ravla’s position these totems were handcrafted, of great antiquity and priceless, with the extensively detailed provenance to prove it.

Dakhaari spies in the Czhanos and Saloi camps had informed Ravia that neither Enemy was planning assassination attempts – but she kept a wary eye out for assassins as a matter of course. Most of her attention, however, was concerned with thoughts of the Enemies’

leaders; both the extensive covert material that her spies had gathered over the years, and her impressions from personal observation.

The Czhan, Koth, for example, struck her as being blunt and pigheaded and straightforward as any hero from ancient myth. Of course, the fact that he had managed to hold his Empire together through any number of colony uprisings and attempted *coups d'etat* meant that this could only be a veneer over a subtle and strategically calculating mind – but Ravla felt that, under the pretence and the levels of misdirection, there was a little core left of those heroes of old. There was certainly an animal and bullish presence there to which she had responded – a definite sense of chemistry. And maybe this could be made use of.

55

It must be said that Ravla thought in terms of sensuality. 'Thought' being the operative word. In the same way that a billion disparate factors can be integrated by a genius into a unique *gestalt* Idea, the innumerable factors of another person, his or her context, the larger overall metacontext and how they all might possibly relate to oneself, were integrated by Ravia into certain and considerably basic responses. And her responses to Koth had been very basic indeed.

Morweth the Saloi on the other hand, remained almost nothing but a cold cipher. Dakhaari intelligence reported nothing of him except that he performed to the letter his complex and devious but ritually detailed duties as leader. Nothing could be discovered of his personal life.

Of course this might just mean that Saloi counter-Intelligence had prevented the spies from finding anything out – but on meeting him Ravla herself had been able to get nothing from him. It was as though his lungs breathed and his limbs moved and his mind thought, but there was nothing inside him doing it. It was not as if he were an automaton or a golem – she was perfectly certain of that. It was just that there was nothing much inside.

His subordinate, Sareth, on the other hand, was in a certain sense very interesting indeed. There was someone real in there, Ravla thought. His movements under his robes had denoted a kind of subtle, supple strength, more refined than that of Koth's brute force, like that of a dancer as opposed to a wrestler. It was a pity that the well-cut expense of the robes themselves denoted a Saloi with no ultimate authority, because Ravla rather thought, she could get on with Sareth. The Saloi

emissaries she had met back on Dakhaar had struck her as slimy and oily, but this Sareth merely gave off the impression of being lightly *oiled. . .*

From an archway that led into other chambers came the sound of several livestock squawking in indignation, followed by a plunging. A Dakhaari in the robes of an Attendant of Ablutions appeared in the archway.

'Baththime ready,' he announced sonorously. 'Bring your own loofah.'

Several of the Dakhaari court scampered away immediately. Ravla waved a finger to order that her ottoman be lifted – and it was at this point that there was a commotion from the doors that led towards the public areas of the Summit.

The doors burst open and the Doctor strolled casually through, not exactly hurrying, but somehow managing to sidestep, very neatly, every effort made by guards and courtiers to stop him.

'I hope I'm not intruding at an impropitious time?' he said.

Ravla gestured for the ottoman to be lowered again. 'Not at all,' she said in the Elevated Tongue.

She studied the man as he stood, relaxed and unafraid in the centre of a 56

glowing cluster of inquisitive Dakhaari – some of whom had reappeared wet and lathered from the bath and were already curdling in the heat of the chamber's torches. Ravia's sensual instincts were adept at perceiving and using the dynamics of a violent and complicated universal pecking-order, and she tried to focus them completely on the Doctor – trying to feel, as it were, where he might possibly fit in.

Nothing.

She was failing, she realized after a while, not because she was simply getting nothing, as with the Saloi Administrator, but because she was receiving a churning mass of chaotic and conflicting impressions that overloaded her senses. The man was obviously a being of Power – but quite which powers he possessed and exercised it was impossible to say.

The one impression she didn't receive in any way, shape or form was

of a physical interest – and this said something in itself, because Ravla on form could make a small whelk with embarrassing personal problems sit up and take notice. Even Morweth had thawed a little, She consciously shifted her position to something a little more seductive on general principles, however, and on the off-chance that she had been wrong. Possible seduction of the Arbiter, even on the off-chance, could only be an advantage diplomatically.

Whatever his powers, this man was obviously an utter stranger to the Three Empires and might fall for even the most well-known, tried and tested wiles.

'You wish to hold conference with me?' she said seductively, in the Elevated Tongue. 'In privacy?'

'If you don't mind,' said the Doctor, 'I think that if we stop all that nonsense from the start it would make life a lot easier for us all. None of that sort of thing has an effect on me. I'm noted for it, as a matter of fact.'

'Oh yes?' Ravla said, a little piqued despite herself, and still in the Elevated Tongue. 'Because we're of different species?'

'Of a different order of species than you can possibly imagine.' The Time Lord grinned. 'I'm well known for knowing nothing of such things, or getting them very slightly but extremely obviously wrong. It saves all sorts of complications.'

He turned his odd little face to Ravla and she suddenly found herself pinioned by his eyes. There was nothing in them but a kind of light and half-contained amusement – but it was amusement at the very depths of her soul.

'Even so,' he said, 'let me say quite candidly that I could tell more about you from one glance than you could ever know of me, not even if you knew me for the rest of your life.'

Pique, so far as Ravla was concerned, had now given way to a cold and sullen-edged anger. The Doctor was trying to impress her with lofty superiority, but coming from his diminutive and puny form it was as if someone was 57

trying to animate a mummified totem by picking it up, waggling its jaw and saying, 'Gottle-of-geer, gottle-of-geer!'

The nearest she had ever felt to it before was in those last days with

her father, just before she had slit his throat. When she had suddenly realized that the things that had been done to her, for all those years, by a huge and terrifying ogre, were now somehow being done by a weak and frail old man who was actually smaller than she was.

'And what can you tell from one glance?' she said with the kind of courtesy you can use to cut through steel plate, still in the Elevated Tongue. 'What do you *intimate*?'

'Well, for a start,' the Doctor said, 'that your entire culture is far more sophisticated than you'd prefer people to believe: rooted in a dynamic that might be simplified as "savagery" but evolved into a complex, precise and now almost entirely static social structure.' He shrugged. 'In the same way that the Czhans have evolved from a militaristic hierarchy, and the Saloi have evolved from treachery' – he pointed a stern finger at Ravla – 'you yourself have cloaked yourself with so many layers of customary posture, pretence and deception that they have choked your essential self until it's almost dead. You're all killing yourselves by degrees, and I think you're going to take everybody else with you, and that's something I really can't allow.'

The Doctor turned and strolled back to the main doors. At them he turned and regarded Ravla with a sly little grin. 'I just wanted to drop by and let you know that, so far as I'm concerned, the diplomatic process starts in earnest bright and early tomorrow morning – and that you're none of you fooling me for a moment.'

In the chamber off Ravla's audience chamber the elderly Dakhaari whose duty it was to keep the large communal bath from boiling over, or developing a skin, noticed several suspiciously large bubbles appearing from the depths.

Curious, he puttered over and bent down for a closer look.'

Something shifted under the surface. The warm milk heaved.

In the subsequent and rather strenuous confusion of Dakhaari bathtime, nobody thought to wonder why the Attendant suddenly wasn't there any more.

Chapter Nine

The ship burst through the upper strata of the Jaris atmosphere trailing lengths of cable and hung in vacuum, geostationary,

reorientating itself on lateral and horizontal planes, homing in on some distant signal – and then its interstellar drive cut in and it was gone, accelerating, into the spaces between the stars.

A cluster of JarisDef smart missiles, launched bare seconds too late, watched the rapidly disappearing dot for a while and then returned to base under minimal power and muttering truculently.

In the ship Benny picked her way through the living quarters looking for the sanitary arrangements; after a hectic few hours several basic physical functions were beginning to assert themselves again and she was going to some convenient receptacle pretty damned immediately.

A web-hammock strung across a cramped cabin space denoted a sleeping area of sorts, but that was its only distinguishable feature in spaces filled with a ferrangeous mix of old and dirty clothing, half-eaten food and empty drinks containers, assorted alien artifacts, scattered tools, broken and ineptly repaired alien electronics and what looked like extremely sophisticated clockwork, infotech media and scattered paper-pulp rags that she could only hope were the results of past colds, all of which denoted a solitary and exclusively male environment.

She supposed she should count herself lucky in that the ship seemed to be equipped with some form of artificial gravity – the lack of which had given the first women in the human space race an extra slice of particular and technologically unanticipated utter hell.

She found an ablutory chamber, which was in the precise state one would expect of a male of any species living alone. Fortunately there was a bin stuffed with strips of clean pulp waste which she could put to the use ostensibly intended, and also arrange over the seat.

Sometime later she returned to the control cabin. The humanoid alien was flipping through displays that seemed strangely mechanical, and showed a tracery of lines and nodes reminiscent of a wireframe road map.

The little furry three-eyed creature was not in evidence and Benny was vaguely relieved. She had taken an instant dislike to it and the feeling was obviously mutual.

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Benny plonked herself onto the spare acceleration couch: the same one into which she had flung herself when the humanoid alien had

hurled the ship into the sky. She still had several nasty pressure-bruises from where lumps of the foam padding were missing.

'I hope those things back there weren't after *us*,' she said. 'Things like that are bad news – and believe me I know what I'm talking about.'

The alien grunted absently, no doubt intent on doing the interstellar equivalent of a three-point turn or something.

Benny played back the glimpse she had caught of the awful scene on the monitors before the ship had taken off: the lurching cybernetic monsters cutting swathes through the cops with the blinding jets of plasma bursting from their tubelike arms, the way the cops had gone to pieces.

She turned back to the alien. 'You're a bit of a cowardly little bugger really, aren't you? If you hadn't hit the panic switch and scarpered, maybe we could have done something. Maybe we could have helped.'

'Oh, yeah, right,' said the humanoid alien absently. 'If I hadn't hit the panic switch and scarpered they'd be scraping what was left of us off the sodding floor.' He turned to Benny. 'My name's Jason, incidentally. Jason Kane at your service. Stuff done cheap.'

Some minutes later, the ship safely on autopilot and the control boards safely locked, Jason Kane clambered into the back of the living quarters and knocked on the hatch leading into the sleeping space. 'You all right in there?'

He opened the hatch and ducked under the mouldy *oogli* fruit, the worn-out boot and the three ceramic Malkovian mead jars that were hurled through it.

He shrugged and closed the hatch again. 'Suit yourself.'

Jason wandered into the cubicle that served as a kitchen area and fixed himself a mug of water from the filter tanks – anything containing ethanol having long since gone, and on Jaris he hadn't had a chance to restock. He downed the water in one, noted that the tank was nearly depleted and fixed himself another. Extended and frenetic periods of fear tended to parch the throat, probably as a balancing mechanism for a certain severe dampening in other areas.

Presently he became aware of a hostile presence behind him.

'Is everybody happy?' he said.

‘Don’t you bloody talk to me,’ the woman said coldly.

‘Suit yourself,’ Jason said again. ‘Anywhere you want to be dropped off, that’s fine by me. I’m sure you can find some more apparent natives to pa-tronize the Multiple Hells out of if you put your mind to it.’

The woman stared at him and then adopted a tone of chilly courtesy.

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‘I’ll need to know where I *am*, first,’ she said. ‘Relatively speaking. If you would be so kind as to show me, and give me some idea what’s happening around here in general. If you have the first clue, of course.’

‘You don’t know where you are?’ said Jason with some astonishment. ‘How did you get here in the first place?’

‘It’s a long story. And it’s none of your business. Suffice it to say, I need some background information so I know where I’m headed.’

‘Nothing,’ said Jason, ‘believe me, would give me greater pleasure. What about my money? I seem to remember you saying how you could get me some money. ‘You’ll get it. Don’t you worry about that.’

Jason grunted and led her to the control cabin, aware that the social dynamic had now shifted into the sort of cold, precise politeness used by those who dislike each other but are stuck together; who have to find a way of getting along without committing eventual, cumulative and mutual bloody murder.

In the control cabin he switched on a pinboard viewer and hunted around on the control pad until he found a colour-coded map of the overall Cluster.

‘That’s Jaris,’ he said shortly, indicating a pinpoint to one side of the swirling mass. ‘Where we came from. This here’s one of the independent sectors; hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred inhabited worlds this side of the Empires.’

‘What are those?’ the woman said, pointing in turn to three loosely globular collections of points, highlighted respectively in ochre, cyan and viridium.

‘Those? I just told you. They’re the Three Empires. The Saloi, the

Dakhaari and the Czhans. Incredibly bad news. They're on the point of war over some little rotifer-speck of a planet called Moriel.' Jason shrugged. 'Last I heard, the news-sets were saying they were holding peace talks somewhere called the Summit, but I reckon that's going to last as long as –'

'Peace talks, eh?' the woman interrupted. Mighty Empires poised for war?

Fate of worlds hanging in the balance? That sort of thing?'

Jason shrugged. 'So they say.'

'If he's anywhere, that's where he'll be,' the woman said to herself 'Sticking several sorts of oar in if I know him. And I do.' She turned to Jason. 'This Summit thing. That's where we're going.'

'You can go and stuff yourself sideways,' said Jason.

Eventually Jason Kane had agreed to take her as far as the Dakhaari outpost planet of Kalas, which it seemed was far enough away from the epicentre of possible conflict for him to be reasonably sure of getting in and out with his skin intact. Benny reckoned, given his record so far, that on Kalas she'd be able to find almost anyone prepared to go further towards the centre of things.

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Thereafter she had contrived to ignore him, so far as was possible in ad-jacent couches in a cramped cockpit. She listened to the Galactic Net on triophonic headphones approximately adapted for the human head, trying to pick some sense out of the babble and static.

This was proving difficult for two main reasons.

First, it was like a twentieth-century Englishman who was aware that Latin had existed, but had never studied it, being expected to understand spoken colloquial Latin just because English was partially derived from it. Benny was something of a linguist, and had in the past despised those who displayed such ignorance of language – and now she found herself in more or less the same trireme.

The second reason was the presence of Jason himself.

She was actively forcing herself to ignore him; forcing herself to look at anything other than him, her mind to think about anything other

than him –

all of which, like the crucially important blue camel anti-component of a flying carpet, was having precisely the result one would expect.

For one thing the very fact of his existence, here, in the Dagellan Cluster, opened up some very interesting questions. The alien abductions sanctioned by the more dubious Earth governments were a strictly minor and localized phenomenon on twentieth-century Earth, and those abductees who survived the process were scrupulously deposited back in their pickup trucks with a bad case of sunburn and the number of a good literary agent. And those who didn't survive, of course, were just dead.

So just how, exactly, had a human being come to be found wandering alone and apparently unharmed half a galaxy away? Such a human might well repay detailed and avid questioning, might prove an invaluable resource for anyone who dealt with alien cultures in the field and so, all things considered, it was a bit of a pity that this human was such a complete and total tosser.

Benny replayed the events of the night before with a cool consideration that, she felt, was entirely uncontaminated by her own perfectly justifiable anger and dislike. When she had first met him she had simply been unable to see him as human, partly because of alien gestures and postures no doubt picked up through osmosis over some considerable time, and partly through the simple impossibility of a human's *presence* there.

And he had played on it and deceived her, laughing all the while to himself – and then turning around and accusing *her* of being patronizing, of being nothing better than a tourist.

What did he think? Did he think that all those archeological expeditions and the travels with the Doctor were spent going, 'Ooh, don't the natives look so happy!' Of course, there was no way he should know about marker pegs and big blue telephone boxes – but Benny felt that something of it should be 62

obvious in her general demeanour.

She could tell everything that mattered about him in that instant he had spoken English and the scales had fallen from her eyes: a cocky little bleeder of the sort she particularly detested. A braggart, who turns his back and runs at the first hint of real danger. A manipulator, unable to imagine the needs of another unless they can be turned to

serve the interests of himself The sort who comes on with the egg-sucking grin that charms the shirt off your back and the underwear off your behind and then, after emptying your credit account, screwing your best friend in your bed and probably giving you scabies into the bargain, never, ever calls.

Even without looking at him she could feel his speculative eyes on her – and when she turned to glare at him to find him seemingly absorbed in punching numbers in a keypad, whistling soundlessly and apparently not giving her a thought, that just showed how sneaky and cunning he was being about it.

That got her good and angry, and she spent the next half-hour listing every single bad point about every man she had ever known, sexually or otherwise, and adding it to the accumulator total above.

She was so happily engrossed doing this that she totally failed to notice any changes in the ship's course until it lurched to a relative stop and spilled her from her couch.

'That has got to be the worst bit of piloting I've ever seen in my life,' she said sourly, rubbing at an elbow that had been bumped on a console. 'And I've seen a few. Are we there yet?'

Jason snorted and tapped a screen displaying a number of disks connected in series by vector-lines. 'What do you think this is? Science fiction? It's like ninety-seven lightyears to Kalas. It's going to take at least a *gik*.' He totted it up on his fingers. 'That's three or four days, give or take. This is one of the sub-line service stations. It's dormant now, what with the slump, but the energy cores should still be hot and it's the best I could do.'

He reorientated the ship and, through the canopy, Benny saw a spiderlike, unilluminated mass of pure black blocking out the background stars.

'We had to leave Jaris before we were properly charged,' Jason said. 'We were pushing hard even to make it this far. Plus, we didn't have time to replenish the air and water tanks. The water doesn't matter 'cause we *make* it in an almost closed system, but the air's important. Four more hours, five hours tops, before we go all sort of anoxic.

Benny looked at him with the same look she had used when she had first set eyes on the ship. 'So what are we going to do?'

Jason Kane shrugged. 'I'm going to send it a *bona fide* distress signal.

That'll reactivate a couple of sections, and normally the station would transfer us minimal power and resources to make it back to Jaris – only I'm going to paste 63

in a couple of code sequences to make it think we're a couple of hundred times bigger than we are. That should give us enough to make it maybe half the way to Kalas. I cooked up the code sequences myself, by the by, what with being a bit of a technological genius on the quiet. Renaissance man, me. You may kiss my ring.' He held out a sardonic hand.

'And you can kiss mine, sunshine,' said Benny.

'I see the spirit of the music halls is not yet dead,' said Jason.

They drew closer to the dark mass. Jason activated spotlights and tiny but slowly expanding dots of brightness tracked across its surface, expanding until it was discernible that they were illuminating metal. He jockeyed the controls, locating an airlock, and slowing the ship to almost a dead halt until, presently, there was an impact and a clang and the complex locking of securing mechanisms.

It was only later, when she learnt a little more about the ship's controls and realized that Jason had effectively been doing it by eye and the seat of his pants, that Benny would recognize what a truly masterful piece of manoeuvring this had been. At the time she merely thought how cheap and shoddy Jason's automated systems must be.

Jason, for his part, was flicking a switch to kill the artificial gravity. 'Don't want to mess up the equilibrium,' he said. 'These things build up, and the Control incorporation-hives get a little shirty when their stations go spinning catastrophically out of control.'

He boosted himself from his couch and kicked himself in freefall to the airlock hatch. 'Now ordinarily we could do all this by remote, only my remotes don't work. . . '

'Now why,' said Benny, 'does that not surprise me?'

'. . . so we're going to have to go inside and run back a couple of cables and gearchains and tubes. No big deal, it's doable.'

He opened the inner airlock door, checked the interior/ exterior pressure-ratio on the hydraulic display set into the outer hatch, and hit the lever that would open it.

He hit it again. And again. ‘Bugger!’

And Benny, for her part, recalled how back on Jaris the blaster bolts of the canine cops had slammed into the hatch.

‘Um,’ she said worriedly.

Jason was peering equally worriedly into the tiny and dimly flickering monitor of an exterior camera. He turned back to Benny, now looking very, very worried indeed.

‘It’s fused to the hull,’ he said, ‘Only in a couple of places but it’s on the outside. There’s no way we can get to them and there’s no way out.’

Chapter Ten

Around a *jiik* after his meeting with Queen Ravla, and having delivered fundamentally the same message to Supreme Commander Koth, the Doctor wandered through the tortuous prefabricated remodelling that the Saloi quadrant had undergone since his initial chat with Sareth. He went through painstakingly constructed dungeons with manacles hanging from the walls. He went through rooms of plush and gilt with chaises tongues and paintings of naked ladies on the walls. He went through medical surgeries with restraints fixed to the surgical slabs. He went through little closets lined with spikes and filled with water. He went through rooms containing mallets and a length of dowelling.

Not once did he see a Saloi – but his extremely keen and unorthodox senses told him that they were watching, somewhere, out of physically based sight.

And at length he came to the chamber in the centre of the maze, where Morweth and Sareth were waiting for him while ostensibly chatting about some security matter or other, as though they had been waiting for him all along, rather than extremely hurriedly trying to anticipate where he was going to be, and hoping to the Hollow Gods they’d got it right.

‘I was just wondering, Administrator,’ the Doctor said as they both turned to face him with apparent surprise, ‘what your own personal opinions are on the reasons for this conflict.’

Morweth made a subtle gesture of affected perplexity with his hessian-sleeved arm.

'I understand,' he said, 'that my trusted Chief of Security covered several of these points with you earlier.'

'Well, yes,' said the Doctor, 'but one always likes to hear things from the Bog Woppet's speaking tube, as it were.'

'Very well.' The Administrator looked an extremely close approximation of thoughtful for a moment. 'There is a myth which I find particularly appealing, and there may even be a grain of truth in it, who knows?'

He sat down on his cot – far shabbier even than the one utilised by Sareth, but with that aesthetic and synthetic shabbiness that comes from man- *giks* of handcrafted effort – and began to narrate.

At the beginning of Time (said Morweth) the Mother of the Universe was gravid with the Ur-souls of the Three Races who would live within the Empires 65

and have dominion over them under the Hollow Gods.

Now the Hollow Gods, who knew that only one Race could rule productively, decided that this Master Race would be the First Born, which all other living things must kneel to before them.

Now the First of the Ur-souls to emerge was Czhanos – but this no more than an arm. So the Hollow Gods tied a silver thread around the arm so it would be known to be First.

But then the arm withdrew, and now out came the feet of Saloi. And then the Hollow Gods, in a slightly uncharacteristic lack of omniscience, believed that this would be the First Born – and so tied a thread of pure yellow gold around its feet so that it would be known as the First.

But then the feet withdrew. And for a while there was nothing. And then from the Mother of the Universe came the red and screaming Dakhaar, followed closely by the rest.

Now Czhanos held that, under the Rules, it was techncally the First. And therewith resolved to fight for its Dominion while scrupulously observing those Rules of Honour to the very Letter.

And Dakhaar held that it was First and Whole and born with Blood and

Pain, and therewith resolved to fight for its Dominion with Blood and Pain and its entire Being.

But Wise Saloi had none of these Justifications. It merely and quite Frankly Wanted Dominion – and this fundamental Honesty of Purpose allowed it to subsequently use all the Treachery and Deviousness at its Command.

And these Three, the Soldier, the Savage and the Traitor, have been fighting ever since.

'What a lovely myth,' said the Doctor when Morweth had finished. 'Apposite, pertinent and containing several of the tried and tested verities. Did you make all of that up on the spur of the moment?'

'In actual fact,' Morweth said, 'Sareth here tends to deal with the literary specifics of these things. I believe he told it to me this morning, for such a time when it might ever become appropriate.'

Kalaleth of the Saloi, from his vantage point above a grille, in a narrow crawlspace specifically built by the Saloi for this purpose, watched the Doctor as he walked through a section of the maze, leading out of the quadrant.

He had briefly debated with himself whether to make use of his blowpipe –

but, while the Hollow Gods had not been entirely specific upon this point, Saloi policy had decided that it would probably not exactly please them if they summarily killed the Arbiter. This was by the nature of things an enjoyment that the Hollow Gods would reserve for Themselves.

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So now Kalaleth shufRed back into the crawlspace – and then stopped, sensing that there was an area of wall that was suddenly not there any more.

A hole had opened up in the basic structure of the Summit.

And something moved behind it.

Kalaleth's arms were pinned in front of him by the dimensions of the crawlspace. He could not even bring his blowpipe around as a massive, pale and gelid-fleshy insectoid limb curled around his feet and hauled him into the walls.

Chapter Eleven

In the cargo hold of the ship, in a nest-like construction of twisted wire, the little furry three-eyed creature that the woman had taken such an instant dislike to was sniggering to itself and fiddling with the collection of bright and shiny things it had purloined magpie-like over the years: heavy lead-clad chemical batteries, lattice-like tangles of wire, fractured crystals and strangely shaped lumps of silicate, the desiccated carapace of some long-dead insect the size of a rabbit, several small items of extremely alien equipment for which Earth-based humanity did not as yet even have names and, strangely, several items from Earth itself, including a wind-up gramophone, a tarnished silver snuff box and an old and dried-up bottle of Worcester sauce.

The little creature appeared to be playing with them at random, attaching something here, twisting things together there – and it would take a far better eye than the none that were currently available to discern that there might be method in its madness.

The little creature's activities were cut short when the hatch leading forward clanged open, and the woman and Jason came through it.

The woman was staring at Jason in incredulity as he zipped his jacket up tight. He had found some slightly grubby elasticated bandages and had wrapped his face with them to mummified effect.

'You're going to go out like that?' she said. 'Don't you have a space suit or something?'

Jason scowled under his bandages. 'Yeah, right. I suppose that back on Earth you had special falling-out-of-car suits for every time you fell out of a car. This is all we've got.' He pulled on a pair of gloves and licked the air seals on a pair of goggles before settling them on his face. Thank the Hollow Gods my trousers are relatively tight, that s all I can say. The last thing I need is absolutely everything of personal value prolapsing.'

He sorted through the junk strewn thinly through the hold until he found a length of line. Something else moved in the junk; he reached out a hand and snagged an irate and struggling furry three-eyed alien creature.

'I think you'd better take Shug up front with you,' he said, holding the

little thing out, heedless of its scrabbling claws on the leather of his jacket sleeve.

'Shug?' The woman looked at it. 'It suits him.'

Jason deposited his pet through the forward hatch then hauled himself over 69

to the cargo doors and tied one end of the line to a bulwark, the other to his belt, to which a couple of sealed pouches and a knife on a lanyard were already attached.

He turned back to the woman. 'Now remember: you go back and dog every set of hatches behind you before you hit the cargo-door controls. That should deal with the forced decompression. It cuts you off from the working replenishment systems but it should leave you with at least ten minutes' breathable air up front. And if I don't come back in ten or fifteen minutes I won't be coming back at all.'

'You really know how to inspire confidence in a girl,' the woman said.

Jason shrugged, unconcerned. 'I've done this before. It's no big deal –

though, if you ever want to try something *really* tricky, try pressing a button up the front when you're on your own and right back *here*.'

He thought of something. 'There might be some oxygen left in the cockpit's emergency tanks: I don't know. To tell you the truth, I don't think I've ever actually checked them. If you get a slow leak or something up there it might be an idea to crack them open. You know the smell?' He tried to remember something applicable from Earth. 'Like matches?'

'I'm quite aware of the signs of slow decompression,' the woman said, 'thank you very much.'

'You're quite, quite welcome.' Jason flipped her a recollected finger-signal he hadn't consciously remembered for years.

The woman went back through the hatch and Jason heard the clangs as it was secured. He stared straight ahead at the cargo doors and tried to stop himself shaking as second piled on endless second and the seconds stretched to minutes.

He had never in fact done this before. It had just seemed like a good idea to suggest at the time, hatched in the hope that someone else

would point out that it was a bloody stupid idea, be forced to come up with something better, and then be honour-bound to do it herself But, of course, the woman hadn't.

Bitch.

Jason stared ahead at the doors, noting with the mild and emotionless interest of the truly terrified how the gasket seals were almost shot. He was going to have to replace them the next time he serviced the ship, and definitely before he got another proper job: the port authorities of most planets tended to look askance at vehicles that inadvertently jettisoned their cargoes the moment they hit the spacelanes.

He was just thinking this as the locking mechanisms chunked, the cargo doors burst open and he was sucked out into black vacuum.

* * *

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Benny felt the ship lurch as the air was expelled from the cargo bay. She wondered if the reaction would be enough to knock the shuttle and the entire station into the catastrophe orbit Jason had talked of earlier.

Oh well, it was too late to worry about that now – and in a fractal universe, where you could kill everything at the other end of it and a couple of million years later simply by blinking, you had to stop taking the blame for things at some point.

Benny shoved herself from the control panel and turned to face more immediate problems, such as being shut in an incredibly cramped space with nothing for companionship but a little alien creature who now seemed absolutely furious and seething about something. It spat at her from where It was floating in mid air and aimed a vicious swipe at her with a paw.

'Just don't start, okay?' Benny said. 'You get on with your life and I'll get on with mine.'

The little creature seemed to catch her tone and skulked off, sculling through the air with a lofty hauteur. It seemed to have every bad characteristic of a cat that you could name, without any of the balancing beauty and grace or occasional playfulness. Benny really, *really* hoped it wouldn't start spraying indignant territorial urine

everywhere, as Wolsey the cat would sometimes do when particularly annoyed.

Even this soon, without replenishment, the air seemed stuffy and the background odours were becoming overwhelming. Benny remembered some of the stories concerning early Earth-based spaceflight, how the environmental regulation controls of anything from a Gemini capsule to the cabin of a Shuttle had been unable to deal with such basic but unanticipated bodily functions as the production of mucus, the expulsion of uric acid through the pores in addition to the urethra and – perhaps most importantly – the expulsion of some point-seven five of a cubic metre of impure methane, per colon, per day, in what was effectively a pressurized tin can floating in a vacuum. Recovery crews had fainted when they opened the hatch. And those inside had prayed to God that the electrics wouldn't spark. It was probably something like this.

She remembered other stories about mankind's Glorious Ascent to the Stars: the fuelling process of an Ariane rocket, which she had found perfectly hilar-ious – up until the point a couple of subjective years back, when, passing briefly through the twentieth century, she had found herself *out* there in the sealed suit, linked umbilically to the Kourou control bunker half a mile away, moving feet she couldn't see a centimetre at a time, pumping in the dimethyl hydrazine and nitrogen tetroxide for eighteen solid hours with a bad dose of locally contracted dysentery and without so much as a catheter. They'd had to hose her down afterwards.

And speaking of ' *man* kind', what about those NASA feasibility reports on 71

archive file concerning women in space, and how the poor frail dears shouldn't be allowed to do it because the stresses of a launch and of subsequent manoeuvring in freefall might turn their sexual organs inside out. Benny's first thought, on reading of this, had been to wonder why the National Aeronau-tics and Space Administration hadn't immediately been deluged with women wanting to have a go. . .

She realized that her mind was wandering and brought it back firmly to the matter in hand. She was a little surprised at herself; she was normally able to focus herself easily in situations like this.

She had also been surprised when this Jason Kane had suggested going EVA, without an apparent thought for his own safety. She had

never even considered that he'd have it in him. Was it possible that she had misjudged him to some extent?

Probably not; it was all a matter of context. Just as a Kalihari bushman might wander casually through a wilderness that would terrify and kill a city-dweller, or a twentieth-century human might drink milk with a healthy lacing of Strontium 90 without giving it a thought, the various perils of sustained space travel were just a simple and everyday part of this Jason Kane's life.

It took something that he could actively conceive of as danger to trigger his cowardice.

In fairness, though – and without it changing her low opinion of him in any way whatsoever – Benny decided to try to be objective about him. They were going to be stuck together for a while, it seemed, if they survived the next half-hour. So she tried to be objective.

For one thing she couldn't really keep on calling him a ratty little creep for the simple reason that, physically, he was taller than she. Six foot one maybe and muscular with it, with the lithe and easy toughness that comes from hard work as a way of life rather than conscious effort. The rattiness and littleness came from within, from the soul if you like, which was quite little and ratty enough for anyone.

His dress sense was also appalling: a kind of half-remembered parody of later-twentieth-century fashion – but okay, that was simply when he was from.

She was really going to have to do something about it, though. She was, after all, going to have to look at him for the foreseeable future.

There was something else clamouring for her attention m her mind, something linked to a smell, but she couldn't quite pin it down.

Maybe she should mention something. Do something about the standard-issue sloppy male personal habits. Put him in some decent twenty-sixth-century clothing like a suit of lights and a snood and he might even look halfway presentable – while remaining utterly other than her type, of course.

There was a sense of animality about him, in his manner and his movement, 72

that frightened her on levels she really didn't feel like thinking about;

a sense of potential control loss that could be very, very dangerous indeed.

The change in smell was getting a little intense, now – not through its actual strength, but because of how her mind was reacting to it: panicking, screaming at her to do something; but her thoughts seemed mushy and increasingly vague. She concentrated on the smell, trying to remember what, precisely, it was.

By the time she had finally identified it as kitchen matches, she had forgotten what was so important about it.

The ship was positioned laterally to the station; the outrush of air launched Jason on a trajectory that would miss it completely.

Fortunately, he hadn't been aiming for it in the first place. The line attached to his belt brought him up short, almost rupturing his kidneys in the process, and he hung there for several seconds as the decompression wind blasted past him.

And then the wind was gone, and there was a moment of relief before a million tiny things exploded and ruptured inside him and he swelled. The pain was indescribable, as he would subsequently discover after attempting to describe it, at length, at every opportunity, for months to come. Sweat boiled from his pores and supercooled the surface layers of his skin.

But there was no time to think about it now. Mouth clamped agonizingly shut against the breath that distended his cheeks against his bandaging, lungs threatening to tear themselves loose, he hauled himself back on the line, grabbed the sill of the open cargo doors, hauled himself around until he was facing the station and boosted himself across the gap with a hefty kick.

Only then did he remember that he had forgotten to cut the line. He grabbed the knife on his belt fumbled with it, retrieved it, sawed frantically at the line and had almost sawn through it when it taughtened and snapped, not stopping him dead but killing a lot of his momentum.

It was five seconds before he hit the side of the station – and he misjudged it.

He had never before realized the minute but consequential part that the barely perceptible changes in air pressure, the tiny and unconsciously heard sounds carried by it, played in even the most

basic and instinctive process like grabbing for something or fine-judging immediate distance. The impact knocked the barely held breath out of his lungs, every single molecule, crushing their internal surfaces adhesively together.

With a kind of detached horror, of the sort that has one coldly noting the purely physical effects of a trauma even as one undergoes it, he noted how, automatically, his lungs were desperately trying to haul in air that wasn't there.

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Trying to breathe vacuum.

In fact, this was what saved him. It applied an internal tension that prevented his lungs from collapsing catastrophically and ejecting themselves from his mouth – something that would have happened instantly if he had been capable of displaying an iron control and of stopping his body from mindlessly trying to breathe.

As it was, he just went off his head.

It was only later, years later, that he came to some conclusion as to what happened next; piecing it logically together from what could only have happened and from the chaotic reclaimed images of dreams, from which he would wake feeling perfectly relaxed and rested to find that Benny was for some reason curled around him clutching him tightly to her and telling him how everything was all right in a voice shaking with distressed and fearful sobs.

What must have happened was this:

The original plan had been simple enough. When the service station was fully operational and – for want of a better term – manned, it operated a number of maintenance airlocks to support the EVA of what were effectively space-suited gas jockeys. These people were almost entirely redundant, the refuelling and replenishment systems of the station being almost entirely automated; and they were little more than a dispensable and minimum-waged bit of Control Incorp window-dressing. But the perilous nature of extra-vehicular activity meant that under interstellar employment law the hatches had to be numerous, self-powering and capable of emergency crash procedures.

What with the Cluster-wide slump caused by the impending war, the practice had been discontinued as no longer cost-effective – the EVA personnel of even the active stations going summarily from redundant

in one sense to redundant in another – but the crash hatches were still there. And it might still be possible to use one of them – if it could be located in the distressingly short time available before catastrophic vacuum trauma and extremely messy death. It was theoretically possible given perfect timing, the total lack of unforeseen circumstances and assuming that every stage of the process was performed absolutely and perfectly correctly the first time.

The problem was, of course, that while in a theoretically perfect universe such conditions might obtain, they certainly didn't occur in this one. Jason knew exactly what he should be doing, and precisely when he should be doing it – but every conscious human action is surrounded by a fuzzy cloud of worry and indecision, of sudden, stray and unconnected thoughts, of seconds-long lapses of shame at the last bit of stupidity or incompetence that then wreck the timing and the concentration for every subsequent action, wrecking them by the inbuilt cascade effect of simply being aware and alive.

Jason's consciousness knew, on some subliminal and fundamental level, 74

that if it carried on like this it was quite simply going to die. So it shut itself down. Shut off the levels of ego and association and libido that sidetrack one along the useless lines of 'Gotta do this *now* or me and that woman are dead and. . . cor, she's like totally uptight and she looks at you like you're something she's scraping off her boot, but she's still a bit tasty isn't she? I wonder what she looks like in her underwear and I wonder if she'd – oh shit, I just died.' Shut it all down and let the meat machine it all lived in just get on with the job.

The Japanese would know the process as *muga* – though Jason, whose terms were less androcentric thought of it as the similar Tragorian process of *selaki*: the channelling of one's entire resources, one's entire forces, into one white-hot burst directed towards a specific end. Such a state ordinarily requires some years of training, Inner contemplation, purification and the achievement of serenity – but after thinking about it for a while, later, Jason came to the conclusion that one could achieve more or less the same effect with just under half a minute of utter and abject terror.

He came to himself shuddering with recovery from hypothermia and gasping for breath with desiccated lungs that felt as if they'd been filleted: a jagged, glassy pain deep inside them that made him want to puke. He was in an airlock, under pressure, hard white inert-matrix fluorescents dazzling him.

A cover plate hung off the bulkhead by one of the folded-over, interlocking metal connectors that in the Cluster were the common equivalent of screws.

The clockworks behind it were linked by a bridging gearchain, one of the several he had brought in his pouches, short-circuiting their processes out. He must have found the airlock, found it inoperable and automatically activated it again. This was so far out on the limits of possibility that his desperation must have been superhuman.

There were lesion-ridges swelling from between the elasticated bandages on his face, his nose was clotted with crusting blood and his wrists and calves had swelled like small bruised balloons where they met his boots and gloves.

Whole areas of skin were flaking into dry but still sub-zero-cold powder. He had never felt better in his life – but finding that you *are* alive will tend to do that.

Jason opened the inner hatch and hauled himself into the thin and musty air of dormant, dim-lit gangways.

He had got turned around and it was five minutes before he found the connecting airlock leading to the ship. It took another ten minutes working on the blaster-welded seams with a little acetylene cutter before he could open the hatch.

There was an inrush of air, disconcertingly strong even under the minimal reserve pressure at which the station was maintained. ‘Oh damn,’ Jason mut-75

tered, launching himself through the hatch.

Shug was very much alive and scolding him, from where he was entangled in the straps of one of the couches.

The woman was floating by the control console, utterly limp, her mouth slack. She hadn’t been breathing vacuum, but Jason knew that, while she hadn’t started haemorrhaging, there hadn’t been enough pressure to force oxygen through the capillaries and into her bloodstream. Her face was deathly pale, her lips blue, and Jason thumbed up an eyelid to see that her eyes had rolled up inside her head.

Jason then spent fully a quarter of a minute panicking. He knew how to resuscitate anoxia cases, had indeed done so successfully a few

times; the problem was that he had never done so on a human. The last time had been on an Oolonian, for which the correct method was to hit them repeatedly in the face with a spanner, and he somehow didn't think that would do much good in this case.

Eventually he calmed down a bit, decided that anything was better than nothing, hauled her to him, locked his arms and legs around her to give himself some purchase and pressed her to him rhythmically while sucking at and blowing into her mouth.

After a while he even remembered to take his mouth from hers between breaths.

Benny surfaced from a dream reluctantly; she liked dreaming on the whole, largely for the simple fact that, like most of her twenty-sixth-century generation – what with several psychological advances by then commonplace –

people didn't pussyfoot around dreaming about whistling kettles, trains coming out of chocolate-coated fireplaces and the suchlike and just got on with it and dreamt about sex. When you were feeling a little lonely and unloved – as Benny had once been fond of remarking to people until the howls of protest eventually persuaded her to stop – it provided you with a little convenient succour.

So when she came out of a dream in which a big strapping man was wrapped around her and trying to suck her face off to find that this was the case, she didn't realize for several moments that she wasn't still dreaming.

Then she did.

Several initially hectic minutes later, Jason pressed a grubby bloodsoaked bit of towelling to his nose. 'I dhink id's *brokud* you bitch!'

'Yes, well, you shouldn't have given me a shock like that,' said Benny. She felt as though she had pins and needles all over, her head was still a little muzzy and she was in no mood to be charitable. 'Don't – and I want you to be 76

really clear about this – don't you *ever* touch me again. I think I'd rather die first.'

'Dod't you worry about it,' Jason said with feeling, if a little indistinctly. 'I dhink I'd rather let you.'

He started to strip off the lumpen bloody bandages that still wrapped most of his face.; and Benny felt a little lurch inside her when she saw the vacuum lesions. It was an entirely unconscious reaction; she supposed that any basically good and sympathetic person would have felt the same – it was just that she didn't actively *mean* to feel it and that made her irrationally angry.

She dealt with it and sighed. 'Look, okay. I've had a bit of medical training.

Let me see if I can sort them out. She reached out brusquely to help him with the bandages – and was shocked when he slapped her hands away from him.

'Don't,' he said, glowering at her with a barely controlled and utter hatred.

'Just don't do me any favours. I didn't do any of it for you. I just wanted to stay alive. I couldn't care less about you.'

Benny looked at him coldly. 'That's perfectly obvious. Did you know we've been together for almost twenty-four hours now – and you haven't even bothered to ask me my name? Well, just for the record it's Summerfield. Bernice Summerfield. That's Professor Bernice Summerfield to you.' That'll show him, she thought.

Jason shrugged. 'So? Well if Professor Bernice Summerfield feels up to lugging some cables and some tubes and some dynamo chains so we can transfer the power, maybe we can get the Hells out of here sometime in the next stellar decade.'

Some two hours later, replete with stolen air and power and hastily patched up, the ship disengaged from the station and dopplered off in the general direction of the outpost colony of Kalas.

And some five minutes after that, the ship that had arrived while Jason was outside and while Benny was slipping into coma – and which had remained hidden from sensors or the naked eye by the bulk of the station – tacked its way around by secondary thrusters, fired up its main engines, and dopplered off after them.

Chapter Twelve

The Dakhaari, the Czhans and the Saloi each had their separate

quadrants in the Summit, but the forth quadrant comprised what might be thought of as public spaces. Here the various factions could meet under terms of uneasy truce – a truce, initially, maintained only by the fact that these spaces had obviously been set apart for these purposes by the Hollow Gods.

There was a modest-sized auditorium here, though easily big enough to contain all three delegations combined. There were smaller rooms in which smaller groups could meet and there were automata-served catering and recreational facilities for those who tired of eating, drinking and recreating in their own quarters and entirely among their own kind.

At first these facilities had been poorly attended, but over time they had come to be used more and more. This was largely due to the Doctor, who seemed to have a knack for being both elusive and ubiquitous at one and the same time. He was never there when you looked for him, and he always turned up when you least expected it.

He never ordered, he never organized or coerced; he would merely appear, as if in passing, to some group or another and suggest things. And these suggestions would seem so obvious and proper, so right at the time, that people would find themselves acting upon them before they quite realized what they were doing.

The auditorium was obviously a place for a general meeting for example, and the Doctor had suggested starting and ending each day with one, so everybody had some idea where they stood. A tripartisan committee had been formed to run this, and after much squabbling and backbiting had even evolved some simple ground rules: no grinding under iron heels, no flying into murderous rages and no poisoning of the person sitting next to you while these meetings were in session.

The Doctor had also suggested – since the whole purpose of the Summit was of diplomacy after all, of finding ways of getting along with each other –

that each faction prepare small lectures and demonstrations upon its history and culture. And the fact that this would tend to shine the best possible light on them was all well and good – was indeed the point. The crucial factor, the Doctor suggested, was that nobody be actively forced to demonstrate or attend – an individual forced to be where he or she doesn't want to be, said 79

the Doctor, is hardly in his or her most receptive frame of mind.

Each of the Enemy factions, in their various ways, had extreme difficulty in comprehending this point – but because the Hollow-God-appointed Arbiter had told them to do it they reluctantly acquiesced. In dribs and drabs people sat through talks on Dakhaari food-bowl etiquette, watched Saloi ritual conjuring tricks and listened to bombastic Czhanos marching songs with zinc-band accompaniment.

And in some way that they didn't quite understand, this largely unstructured process appeared to work. Several interesting facts were spreading organically through the corpus of those gathered here, like benign viruses; facts that might of course be lies, but had previously been unthought of, literally unthinkable, not because the various races' spies had failed to learn them, but simply because, over the ages, nobody had ever thought to wonder about them in the first place.

People, perhaps for the first time, were talking.

Supreme Commander Koth walked through the hanging gardens of one of the recreational areas. There were several of these little micro-ecologies of flora and fauna that seemed to exist for no other reason than to be beautiful and restful. This area was built to simulate an idealized Dakhaar jungle glade.

Somewhere a waterfall was splashing and a cool draft came off it, cutting through the orchid-scented, sultry air.

Various others were here, and Koth saw one of his younger commissioned officers strolling and chatting amiably with a Dakhaari female. This might have angered Koth had he not known for a fact that the girl was a female-impersonating Czhanos agent codenamed the Purple Hand and that he was unsure of the lieutenant's ultimate loyalties, for all that he had been picked from good fighting-stock rather than being one of the congenital imbeciles that were used as a kind of inert filler for the less important officer ranks.

The young Czhan gave a start when he noticed his leader, jolted upright to attention and almost brained himself saluting.

'Don't worry, lad,' Koth assured him. 'I'm not going to eat you. You're off duty. Just don't do anything I wouldn't do. You might get a surprise.'

The Czhanos staff had had severe trouble adapting to this new if

temporary egalitarianism, until their Supreme Commander had damned well ordered them to. Personally, he was finding it a bit of a relief to be freed from some of the day-to-day burdens of authority. It was as though some crushing steel band around his chest had been released, and he had not noticed it until it was gone.

The atmosphere of the place was getting to him, he thought. He'd have to guard against that. It was perfectly all right to have such feelings so long as 80

one didn't let them affect the stern demands of ultimate Duty. He had learnt that years ago, from his father, who had beaten him to within an inch of his life when he had been caught giving extra rations to one of the family slaves.

After his father had calmed down, of course, he had explained to Koth some of the things the slave had done to deserve Indenture rather than being simply and cleanly put to the sword by the Courts Martial. The child Koth, as children do, had been fascinated by these details in much the same way as by a gory horror story – and it was only later, recollecting the shaking relief in his father's voice, that he realized how much danger he had been in with that particular slave. Things were never so cut and dried as they first seemed; slavery was an abomination – which, if it was used as the ultimate punishment, was surely the point.

And in the years later, after the coup, when he found himself picking up the reins of power because there was no one else to do it, Koth had been forced by circumstance, time and time again, into the same cruel decisions that had prompted the coup against the previous Supreme Commander in the first place. And it could only be a matter of time before someone new and capable emerged from the younger generation of officers – perhaps even the young lieutenant he had just talked with – and Koth himself was deposed.

For the moment, though, his position was indisputable. Several of the matters raised by the Summit demanded his attention as ruler and he was trying to form policy for his people. There was the fact, for example, that the specific and just systems of Czhanos punishment slavery had been news to everybody else. They thought that the Czhans simply enslaved people as a matter of course. They thought that occupation by Czhanos forces would mean instant servitude, and this basic misunderstanding had fuelled their animosity against the soldier race for aeons.

And there were other issues, too, issues concerning the Enemy races. One was the fact that the Dakhaari word for 'death' also meant the 'little-death' of intimate relations – which made all the stories of mass murder, and the stories of how Queen Ravla herself had 'killed' an extremely large number of people, considerably less foreboding, and rather more interesting to one with a more thoughtful frame of mind.

The so-called cannibalism of the Dakhaari also bore examination – it having emerged, in a workshop entitled *How to Mince Up the Noses and Guts if Enemies and Stick them into their Own Intestines and Fry Them*, that calling animal livestock 'Enemies' was largely a part of the slaughtering and preparation rituals. They ate what Koth thought of as 'people' only in exceptional and clearly delineated circumstances.

Even the Saloi were not as simple as they seemed – if it could be put like that. In a talk which Koth had attended, the Saloi named Sareth had de-81

tailed something of the work of the Removal Men, the disappearances and the hideous tortures that were practised upon Saloi dissidents. These had been loathsome in the extreme – but told with the cadences and constructions of one who is half-amusedly telling a lie so blatant that it cannot be taken seriously. The complete opposite was probably closer to actual fact, and likely the nearest a Saloi could get to telling the complete truth.

Of course, since this was a *Saloi* speaking, this could all be merely a double-bluff, but Koth fancied he could detect a spark of true decency and integrity in this Sareth beneath the levels of misdirection. Indeed, his own agents on the Saloi homeworld had over the years told of the horrendous tales circulating about the Removal Men and their work – but had not once encountered the Removal Men in any other face than they wore for directing traffic, or investigating murders, or other general policing work. As he reviewed some of the stories, together with all these other misreadings that had contributed to race hatred throughout the Empires, Koth was reminded of nothing so much as jokes one told to find that other, stupid, humourless people had taken them seriously.

Thus – while they remained Enemies, appointed as such from time out of mind by the Hollow Gods – it was becoming increasingly difficult to see the people of the other Empires as the monsters that one had seen them as before.

They became collections of individuals, of real people. And, if Koth's

privately laid and carefully guarded plans for the planet Moriel succeeded, after the final war waged with this supreme tactical advantage, the treatment of the defeated could only and in all justice be tempered with –

‘Supreme Commander! This is a surprise. No. No it isn’t. I don’t know why I said it. I was rather hoping I’d find you here, in fact.’

The Doctor was leaning on his portable canopy-thing that kept the sun and rain off, glancing happily around himself at the jungle clearing. Koth recalled glancing at the exact space the little man now occupied a moment before. He was positive that the Doctor hadn’t been there.

‘It’s very nice, isn’t it?’ said the Doctor. ‘Remarkable in its specific detail.

Don’t you ever wonder how it was built? When it was built? Who or indeed what it was built by?’

‘The Summit?’ said Koth, slightly puzzled. ‘It’s of the Hollow Gods. It’s always been here. It’s always been.’

‘Quite so, quite so.’ The Time Lord shrugged. ‘Although I sometimes have the distinct feeling that it s only “always” been here comparatively recently.’

Koth had no idea what the Doctor was talking about. Either it was some deep matter that only a being of power such as the Arbiter could possibly understand, or the Doctor was simply talking senseless claptrap again – something the little man seemed to do with alarming frequency.

‘And what are you doing here, Doctor?’ he said. ‘On your way to suggest something else to someone? A mixed emotional cultural massage workshop for beginners or the like?’

‘Ah, you’ve noticed all that, have you?’ The Time Lord beamed.

‘Where I come from,’ said Koth, ‘workshops are where we do weaponry engineering. What’s that got to do with sitting around in a circle and arguing spitefully with each other?’

The Doctor bowed briefly. ‘Forgive me. I tend to pick up odds and ends from all over the place, and some of the terms don’t necessarily

translate. Wrong cultural background. But you're right about what I'm trying to do.' The Time Lord gestured about himself to encompass their entire current self-contained world. 'Given a certain environment and a basic purpose, groups have a particular social dynamic – a kind of macrocosmic Brownian motion that, if one could perceive it fully, would enable one to predict where anyone individual would be at any time, what he was doing, even what he was thinking.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I've been trying to direct things, graft things on, accelerate them towards benign ends to the best of my small ability – but then I became aware that the entire process was slightly skewed. Only very slightly, but on such a fundamental level that none of my amateur tinkerings could affect it, no matter how many new elements I tried to add.'

The. Doctor remained pensive as he regarded Koth with his strange, flat, pale eyes. 'I couldn't change it but I could anticipate it. It was simply that a billion minuscule and ordinarily unnoticeable factors were ultimately conspir-ing to bring you here, to this place and at this time together with – ah! And here they are.'

From the other end of the jungle clearing came three figures which instantly triggered several conflicting and remarkably complex responses in Koth. For certain fundamental reasons he was always both disturbed and excited by the immediate presence of Queen Ravla, but this was quickly quashed by the fact that she was with two of the Saloi. Then came a kind of unthinking reflex relief that she was talking to the shabbily dressed one rather than the splendidly dressed one following behind – until he recalled that this meant she was speaking with the ultimate Saloi ruler, Morweth. This triggered horror at what this might mean for the innumerable factors of the balance of power.

It triggered animal, mating instinct and territorial response. It triggered the feelings of every child finding itself snubbed and left out of the tentpegging team.

All of this and a thousand other things he identified later, with hindsight –

but for the moment he merely felt a barely controllable explosion of rage.

'And what,' he bellowed at the suddenly startled grouping, 'is this? Have ye taken the opportunity to conspire behind my back?'

‘Um, excuse me,’ said the Doctor beside him, almost entirely forgotten. ‘I really don’t think. . . ’

Instantly Ravia rounded upon Koth. ‘We have done nothing,’ she snapped.

‘We merely felt like a walk in the gardens and found ourselves in the same place.’ Her snarl faltered, turned suspiciously upon Morweth the Administrator and fired up again. ‘At least in my case.’

‘And mine,’ said Morweth, with a brief glance to his subordinate for confirmation.

‘Look, I really don’t mean to interject,’ said the Doctor, increasingly worriedly, ‘but –’

‘Ours, I should say.’ Morweth gestured behind him to Sareth, then turned his narrowed, cold and speculative eyes upon Koth himself ‘And what do we find? We find our common Enemy deep in surreptitious conversation with the Arbiter. Under the jungle orchid, as it were. I think that deserves some kind of proper explanation. Now.’

Ravia’s glare could now cut through a planetary crust and cause secondary global warming. ‘You have *allied* yourself with the Doctor? Against us all?

With a being so unlike us that even our own *kinds* might be siblings or mating-groups?’

‘Oh dear,’ said the Doctor, wandering off. Koth didn’t notice him go. He was too busy spluttering apoplectically at this outrageous suggestion. The one about the Doctor, not the one about siblings or mating-groups.

He was dimly aware of a dark presence drifting past him, and recognized it as Sareth – but then his rage finally exploded and, as so often happens in these cases, he regained his eloquence if not his coherence.

‘Ye’ll regret that for the scabby dogs you are,’ he bellowed, reverting to the language of his forebears. ‘Why, I’ll bind ye to the stalky gibbet an’ run ye through wi’ th’ tapster’s maulky awl. Ye’ll gevvan a moothful o’ *heedies* if ye. . . ’

A little way along the artificial jungle path, the Doctor sat with his knees drawn up to his chin, watching glumly as the three great Leaders went at it hammer and tongs. The point of physical violence had not been reached, but it could be only a matter of time.

'I think all your efforts might have been in vain,' said Sareth, drifting to an inconspicuous halt beside him.

'Possibly.' The Doctor seemed unsurprised to see him, although Sareth had been exercising all his skills to be inconspicuous almost to the point of invisibility.

'Cut y'up and gut you! Cut y'up and gut you!' Ravla was screaming, now berserk to the point of literal insanity, over and over again.

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'Oh, don't worry about them,' the Doctor said. He looked up at Sareth gloomily. 'They haven't been primed to kill each other. Not directly. Not yet.'

'What do you mean, Doctor?' asked a puzzled Sareth.

The Doctor made what Sareth alone here had come to realize was one of his distinctive little gestures – a vague wave upon one level, but on another and complex level precisely emphasizing his words by the movement and shape it made in the world.

'You see,' he said. 'As I was trying to tell Koth before I was interrupted, all three of your great rulers here have been profoundly manipulated upon the subconscious and the subliminal levels – possibly for all their lives. The explosion of animosity is part of it – it merely keeps them occupied and diverts their attention from the real threat until it's too late.'

He sighed. 'I'd hoped I might be able to disrupt the process by my presence here, calm them down a little, at least get them away from the present and immediate danger, but –'

Three screams cut through the jungle clearing, and bursting through the *ersatz* foliage came three figures, running for the leaders, their eyes blazing with a supernatural and white-hot rage. One seemed to be a Czhanos soldier.

One seemed to be a Saloi assassin. One seemed to be an elderly male Dakhaar in a robe.

‘Now that, I think,’ said the Doctor to a momentarily stunned Sareth, ‘is what you might call the present and immediate danger.’

Chapter Thirteen

Roz Forrester strapped herself into her exo-rig and put it through the test cycle; weapons-systems extended and spun and retracted with a multiple slam and click. The servo-powered body-armour suit was sleek and light and, fitted to her body, felt like a lethal extension of it. She didn’t know what worried her most – the fact that it was in advance of the exo-hardware of her own time, or that it operated on self-winding clockwork.

Beside her, Chris Cwej was in his own suit. The visor of the helmet was of one-way crystal, save for when a kind of mechanical signalling device flashed messages across it in some indecipherable script – but Roz just knew that the face inside it was wearing the Chris Cwej standard-issue inanely enthusiastic grin.

‘Hey look at *this*,’ he enthused, tinnily, through a helmet speaker that seemed to operate by way of an electromagnet and a thin metal plate. ‘I’ll bet you could do some *serious* damage with this.’ Induction coils ratcheted from their housings in his arm and locked together to produce a grenade-launcher capable of taking a round over half a foot across. That was Cwej, Roz thought. The guy really got into the technology of delivery systems and was a crack marksman, but if he ever actually had to kill anyone he went into trauma over it for days, even when there was no other choice.

‘Just you wait till somebody asks you to fire it at someone,’ she said.

‘Doesn’t bother me,’ Chris said. ‘I’ll just let you do all the shooting at life as we know it. That should give life as we know it at least nine chances out of ten.’

‘No chattering in the ranks!’ a voice roared. Lumbering up the systems-checking ranks of Czhanos troopers came the hulking form of the NCO they had encountered on the Czhanos homeworld, and whom over the past few standard days they had come to know and loathe as Sergeant Vim.

‘Skana and Verkog, four hundred extra *jiiks*,’ Sergeant Vim growled, flicking his beady eyes back and forth on an inclining trajectory of utter spite between them. ‘Verkog why am I not surprised? You is a

poof Gunner Verkog. What is you?'

'I'm a poof, sah!' Roz Forrester shouted back in lieu of the couple of hours of explaining why this was completely untrue on several basic counts.

The sergeant put his hands over his eyes and groaned, then prodded her 87

hard in the chest, leaving a small dent in the body armour. 'Does I look like a *hofficer*, Gunner Verkog?'

'No you does not, Sergeant Vim!' Roz shouted back. She had not as yet *seen* an officer, but she was prepared to bet that he or she wouldn't look like Sergeant Vim.

'Four hundred more extra *jiiks*.'

For some peculiar reason, the translatory process that still affected Chris and Roz had rendered what the Adjudication church called the Disciplinary Way of the Penitent – DWP for short – into the word 'jankers', which neither of them consciously knew, and which was probably buried somewhere deep and inaccessible in the racial memory. But after the first few *jiiks* spent scrubbing out the ship's latrines with a tuskbrush they had got the general idea. They had also decided that, on present showing, they would still be on these jankers by the time the universe imploded for the next Big Bang and beyond.

Vim now turned his attention fully to Chris, apparently more in sorrow than in anger. For some reason that Chris really didn't want to think about, the Sergeant seemed to some small degree to *like* him. Maybe it was the uniform.

'And you, Gunner Skana,' Vim glowered. 'I expected better of you. Lovely shoulders. Lovely shoulders. Five hundred *jiiks*, and let that be a lesson to you.'

The transport truck on Czhanos had taken them to a vast landing field to one side of what they had thought of as the spaceport, which was in fact the city's central waste and refuse reclamation centre. The landing field had been almost dormant, the ships that were there under repair – save for what was obviously a large troop-carrier onto which had been bolted flimsy prismatic-fractured-surface superstructures that would presumably disguise its sensor-recognition signal.

Combat-hardened troops of the sort that Chris and Roz were

impersonating were filing into it under the bellowing direction of sergeants – another loose translation of what Roz and Chris thought of as 'Deacons' – and this had given Roz and Chris pause for thought. As they subsequently confirmed from the talk in the billet cabins, this was a collection of experienced survivors from various planetary police actions; this was a ground force, it was entirely inappropriate for a space war which it seemed would consist of spaceships zooming round and shooting death rays at each other.

Roz and Chris had been herded together with the other stragglers, and their collective heart sank as they realized that they were now a squad under the control, if not command, of Sergeant Vim. The real command, it seemed, was in the hands of a Captain Rutz, who was never once seen in hours of drills and cleaning out of toilets and weapons practice after the ship had taken off.

Now, in the long and narrow chamber in which the squad drilled with their 88

exo-suits, Sergeant Vim stepped back until his shoulders were against a wall inset with a series of circular hatches, like the loading chambers of a cannon.

'Pay attention you 'orrible shower!' he shouted. 'You will now present yourselves to the Captain for *hinspection*! You will not talk unless you are spoke to! You will not chew! You will not make disrespectful gestures behind his back! Is that clear?'

'Clear as crystal, sergeant!' the assembled squad shouted back in unison.

Roz, glancing surreptitiously at the soldier on the other side of her from Chris – a mass of armoured, no-foreheaded muscle and scar-tissue even bigger than the sergeant – wondered who, or what, could possibly be in overall command of these things. Visions of something that could bite your head off and eat it before you could say knife flitted through her mind.

She realized, later, that she was confusing a culture based upon military lines with that of a truly ferocious basic species like the Daleks – and there are certain basic truths about a military system the whole universe over.

An iron access hatch at the end of the chamber clanked and ratcheted back, and through it carne a pale and gangling, dazed-looking Czhan in a splendid and extremely expensive uniform which, sadly, did

nothing to hide his congenital birth defects. This was not the fault of the tailors, since, what with the club foot, wobbly growths and the hunchback, they'd had their work cut out in no uncertain terms.

A beaky cap was on his head, his eyes glazed with alkaloids and terminal imbecility, and one of his tusks had dropped out. This last condition was, she learnt later, the Czhanos equivalent of not being able to stop yourself from bleeding and a chin you'd have to be a hard-core mountaineer with a couple of surreptitious crampons to be able to climb.

This apparition wandered down the line, his limbs involuntarily twitching with some affliction which on twentieth-century Earth would require a healthy dose of penicillin, nodding vaguely at the assembled troops as he passed and muttering some sort of gibberish that neither Roz nor Chris could understand, even when he muttered it in front of them.

This, presumably, was the elusive Captain Rutz.

At length he came to the sergeant, who snapped a salute and bellowed: 'All present and correct, *sah*!'

The captain nearly fell over under the blast. He recovered, fumbled in a pocket and pulled out a sheet of vellum, which he blearily perused, and then turned to face the troops, raising his voice in an address which even the two disguised Adjudicators, who were among the closest, could barely catch:

'Ah. . . damned fine chaps, the lot of you. . . salt of the. . . ah. . . ransacked the settlements of our Enemies I'm sure. . . I have in my hand a piece of paper 89

which. . . ah, *oh*, yes. . . lots of fighting, chaps laying into each other all over the place and I'm. . . ah, yes, well, there you are. . . '

He passed the sheet of vellum to Sergeant Vim (who quietly turned it the right way round) and then wandered off back down the line of soldiers. The hatch shut behind him with a clang.

Sergeant Vim skimmed through the sheet and then surveyed his men. 'Well you heard the captain,' he growled, absolutely in belligerent character. 'That was your briefing. That's where we're going.'

Roz Forrester, who had extensively developed and fine-tuned her instincts as a detective, got the impression that the sergeant was

acting precisely in belligerent character merely as a kind of fallback defence mechanism: a response to being suddenly shaken and not a little worried.

'Um, sarge?' said a short, squat solder down the line, whose name was Pchaprotz. 'Where exactly are we going?'

'No talking in the ranks!' Vim bellowed. 'I'm coming to that! Thirty thousand extra *jiiks*, Gunner Schatzproz!'

The name 'Pchaprotz', in the way that English names might be Brown or Carter or Stone, meant literally a 'tall building'. Schatzproz was a Czhanos word for an outside lavatory, and this was yet another example of what passes for barracks humour the whole universe over.

'This is the big push, lads,' Vim continued. 'This is the one we've been waiting for. We're going to Moriel.' There was a moment of stunned silence.

'Um,' Gunner Pchaprotz said again, extremely tentatively. 'That's *Moriel*, yes, sarge?'

'That's the one, lovely boy,' said Sergeant Vim. 'Seven thousand four hundred and fifty-six extra *jiiks*.'

The squat soldier was not to be deterred. 'That's the one that the Hollow Gods have declared *verboten*?'

Unconsciously, everyone made signs of supplication. If they hadn't been too busy doing this to see Roz Forrester and Christopher Cwej looking around themselves in puzzlement, the two ex-Adjudicators would have probably been torn limb from limb.

'And that's the one where the fleets of every Empire are surrounding and waiting to exterminate anyone or anything that makes the first move on it?'

said Gunner Pchaprotz afterwards. 'The one that this whole war's supposed to be about?'

Sergeant Vim glowered at him and nodded slowly. 'Moriel.'

'Oh bugger,' said Gunner Pchaprotz.

For some hours after leaving the service station Jason piloted the ship in a stony silence, shifting from his habitual relaxed slouch only to smoke the occasional roll-up of some alien alkaloid weed, the bright red welts on his face and wrists and neck darkening to livid bruising. For a while Benny sat beside him, silently fuming. She was perfectly willing to talk to him, but as long as he wasn't going to talk to *her* she'd be damned if she was going to start the ball rolling.

Eventually she decided this was silly.

'Look, this is silly,' she said. 'We're stuck with each other so we might as well pass the time.'

'Oh, yeah, right,' said Jason. 'Let's play a game – or something.' He peered theatrically out of the canopy. 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with S. Space. Your go. I spy with my little eye something beginning with S.

Space. Your go. . . '

'I mean we could just talk,' said Benny. 'You know, like tell each other the story of our lives and suchlike.'

'Fine.' Jason shrugged. 'You go first. I'm all ears.'

'Um.' Benny was caught a little wrong-footed – like most of us, she had the unconscious and egocentric idea that everybody should somehow know all about her life already. 'Well, it's a bit complicated. I mean what time is it exactly back on Earth?'

'Half past four in the afternoon,' said Jason. 'Just in time for tea and biscuits.

How the Multiple Hells should I know?'

'I mean what year?' Benny said patiently – although any sentient lifeform listening would be likely to substitute 'with teeth-gritted murderous restraint'

for the 'patiently'.

'Nineteen ninety-six when I last looked,' Jason said. 'Mind you, that was something like fifteen years ago, more or less. I had a watch once but it broke and I lost count.'

'Well I have to tell you,' said Benny, 'that I come from something like

six hundred years into your future.'

Jason shrugged again, unconcerned. That was really starting to get on Benny's nerves. 'That's cool,' he said. 'Got picked up by a time traveller, right?'

Benny looked at him sharply. 'You know about time travel?'

'Who doesn't? Everybody knows. The only problem with it is that there's this bunch of charmers who call themselves the Time Lords. Your time traveller must have led a charmed life – but it's a dead cert it's going to be extremely short when they catch up with him. If it ever even exists in the first place, afterwards. The buggers tend to wipe things out incredibly thoroughly.

Okay, you're from the future. Watch out for personalized tactical matter-antimatter devices suddenly appearing from a right-angle to reality with "A present from Gallifrey" written on them. So?'

'So I thought I'd better tell you first, so you'd believe what I say,' Benny said.

'Oh yes,' said Jason, 'Like living on other planets and zooming about in spaceships is really going to freak me out.'

Benny thought of several possible responses to this, but on the whole decided it would be more dignified to treat it with the disdain it deserved.

'I was born during the third wave of the Dalek expansion,' she said, now with the kind of restraint you'd need to restrain a serial killer in a grocer's with the fava beans on special offer. 'It was a bad time for the human race one of the worst times we'd ever known. . . '

'What?' Jason turned to look at her with incredulity. 'This is the Daleks we're talking about? Seriously clunky exo-support, limited vocabulary, can't go down stairs? I mean they can just about have a pop at some backwater little planet like Earth, from what I've heard, but they're total jokes.'

'Those total jokes killed my mother,' Benny said. 'Will kill my mother. First my father, then my mother. I saw it. I was very small.' She didn't say it in any particular way. She just said it.

For some reason a look of utter mortification flashed across Jason's face.

He briefly screwed his eyes shut and shook his head and when he opened his eyes they were frightened around the edges. Just a little. As if he were shut in somewhere, with something small and vicious that might attack at any moment.

'Oh,' he said.

Benny suddenly felt a little thirsty, so she went out of the control cabin and had a drink of water from the recently replenished tanks. Then she felt like sitting down and staring at a bulkhead. So she did that for a while.

When she came back she noticed that Jason kept staring searchingly at her face and for some reason he still seemed a little shaken, but she couldn't work out exactly why because she felt perfectly fine. Nothing wrong. Nothing wrong at all.

'Listen,' Jason said as she hauled herself back onto her own acceleration couch. 'What I said about the Daleks. I –'

'Don't worry about it,' she said. 'Forget it. You weren't to know.'

* * *

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Jason seemed anxious to make amends; he listened to her as she told him of her glittering academic career at the Institute and then the Academy and her subsequent distinguished service in TerraFed Spacefleet – a story she had repeated so many times that she almost believed it herself.

She told him of her several even more distinguished archeological expeditions, ending up on Heaven, the mass-grave planet that had been founded after the Earth-Draconian wars. For some reason, possibly because of his stated opinions concerning Time Lords, she found herself glossing over her various exploits with the Doctor, merely saying that she had met a time traveller and had travelled with him for a while.

'That's how I came to be here,' she said. 'In this time-frame, anyway. How about you? How did you come to be out in the Dagellan Cluster?'

‘Is that what you call it?’ Jason said. ‘I’ mean, I generally call it the “Cluster”

myself, because that’s the nearest equivalent to the astronautical term in Basic.

Nobody really calls it anything. Where did you get the Dagellan from?’

‘I think she was the captain of the first Earth ship to ever reach it.’

‘Figures.’ Jason set several degrees of proximity alarm, locked the helm and sat back. ‘I suppose my life was pretty ordinary compared to yours,’ he said. ‘I originally grew up out in the English countryside maybe sixty, seventy miles out of London. Mock Tudor housing estate in one of those peripheral commuter-belt villages where chartered accountants go to die, you know what I mean?’

‘Near enough,’ said Benny. ‘I seem to remember the UK nuclear-waste-age demographics. I thought I caught a tang of the nice, white middle classes under the gutter-argot language rhythms.’

‘Yeah, well. Proper little nuclear family we were: Mum, my little sister, me and a father who belted the living crap out of all three of us. So I got out and hit the city where the nights are cold and the streets are paved with various other sorts of crap.’

He shook his head as if to clear it and, abruptly, a momentary sense of vulnerability about him – something that was noticed only when it was gone –

hardened over.

‘Anyhow. For maybe two and a half years I did this and that – the usual stuff.

Little bit of Centrepoint, little bit of Mile End stomping, little bit of smoking Yorkie foil, a little bit of feeding the chickenhawks. Just the usual. None of it really mattered. A few more years and I’d have been able to haul myself out of it or I’d be dead.

‘And then one Christmas Eve I’m wandering up from Piccadilly to the meat-rack arcade in Oxford Street. I’d blown my last three lots of wages and most of my emergency stash on a couple of pints in the Lion and a new leather jacket from the Zone – special-offer Christmas present to myself, what with 93

winter really starting to bite – and I'm debating whether I look clean and pretty enough in it for a quick and social detour to the Village. Next thing I know, I'm flat on my back in this muddy swamp with a brain that feels like it's been lightly fried and a bunch of scorchmarks across my chest and shins and forearms.'

Benny noticed how Jason's story had the smooth and well-oiled rhythms of one that had been told a great many times, especially to himself – and that he was glossing over several important and possibly quite painful facts. Rather like her own story, come to think of it. She made a mental note to think about that a little later.

'Now at this point I'm occasionally used to waking up in sudden woodland,'

Jason said, 'wrapped around a handy tree bole and with no memory of how I got there. So I really don't think too much about it. Only there's this weird little three-eyed alien *thing* hissing at me, and when I freak out and run it comes after me. And then when I crack my head on a branch of one of the strange and twisty purple overhanging trees, I wake up to find him bouncing up and down on me and gibbering.' He smiled faintly. 'That was how I met Shug. It isn't much, I suppose, but at least it's a constant. He's always around.'

He looked around the control cabin for his nominal pet. 'And most of the time you can't find him. He's probably back in the hold, fiddling around in that bloody nest of his.

'So now I'm wandering through the swamp in a kind of daze. I didn't know it at the time, but I was suffering from profound sensory and psychological overload – everything I saw was entirely different, on a whole new order of difference, from anything I'd ever seen in my life. Even the sky was different.

'So, anyway, I push my way through a clump of vegetation – and suddenly I'm on the lip of a vast crater with an alien city in it. Semi-sentient architecture, antigravity fliers, slingshot spaceports and soma shafts, the whole box of knucklebones.

'Fortunately, as I later found out, I was on t'Kao which was probably *the* major spacelane crossover planet for that sector. That meant a huge variety of lifeforms, but it also meant that things as a whole were more generalized and easily assimilable. Once I got over the shock and picked up a little of the language it was no worse than those first few months in London.

‘So, after what on Earth would be about a year, I suppose, I hitched a ride on an ore-processor launch and I’ve been wandering ever since. Sometimes up, sometimes down; no big story, no big deal.’

No big deal, Benny thought. ‘And you have no memory at all of how you got here?’ she said, aiming for something like neutrality. ‘In the Cluster. Is there any possible way you could have got this far out in the natural course of things? Slave routes or some such?’

‘None at all,’ said Jason. ‘Hardly anybody’s even heard of Earth, and to those who have it’s just some flyspeck on the galactic charts. Nobody goes anywhere near it.’

He looked thoughtful for a moment. ‘Mind you, I seem to remember something from when I was a kid. Some abhorrent fat old venal pork-pie merchant who wrote some seriously crap books, and then claimed that aliens were coming down and sticking probes up people’s bottoms and wiping their minds.

Built a religion out of it or something. They used to slime about us on the street trying to pick us up for tea and reprogramming.’ Jason frowned. ‘Can’t remember his name for the life of me. Would it be something to do with that?’

‘I think I know who you mean,’ said Benny. ‘He was just one of many. He was talking about what people ended up calling the Greys – and he got it entirely wrong, of course. Everybody did. That was purely localized and all the victims of the Greys are accounted for. Believe me, I know what I’m talking about.’

Benny mnemonically called up several psychological history texts she had imprinted some years before at the Institute. ‘Apart from that, a lot of those so-called alien abduction experiences were merely the result of electromagnetic brain-function disruption, hypnagogic visions and Millennial hysteria. Most of the real extraterrestrial contact took entirely different forms. There’s never been a case of an alien actively spiriting a human away and –’

She broke off abruptly as she realized what she was saying.

‘Then again,’ she said. ‘I might just know a man who does.’

And the ship continued on its way to Kalas. And something, too far back to trip the proximity detectors, stalked it.

Chapter Fifteen

In a manufactured jungle clearing in the public quadrant of the Summit, Sareth watched in shock as the three razed figures ran for Morweth, Ravia and Koth – who were so engrossed in their escalating argument that they had as yet failed to notice.

They were going to notice extremely quickly: the Czhan was waving a sabre, the Saloi was bringing up his Glove of Needles and the ragged-robed Dakhaari was swinging an extremely large loofah with a nail in it.

Sareth knew that there were Saloi bodyguards in the near vicinity, just as there were Dakhaari and Czhans, going through the motions of the Summit but always managing to be inconspicuously near their leaders. He had mounted the Saloi guard himself.

But they would never have time to react – and Sareth found that he himself was rooted to the spot, stunned by the suddenness of this attack, the sick awareness of his inability to do anything and the vast and awful knowledge of what the deaths of the leaders would *mean*.

They were going to die, and then everything would just fall apart, and there was nothing he could –

And then something was hurled under the feet of the attackers, unfurling and entangling them in its spokes and strips of tom, bright oilskin cloth. The attackers stumbled. Sareth recognized the remains of the Doctor's umbrella –

and registered that the Doctor was somehow now in the foliage a few hundred paces ahead of him and to one side and level with the attackers – but then Sareth was running, as though this break in the rhythm had broken some neurological cantrip of immobility.

The sudden appearance of an unexpected precipitational sheltering device had barely inconvenienced the attackers; they had merely stumbled, recovered and come inexorably on – but this had given the various leaders time to react. Ravia dived out of the way, slashing at the Dakhaar with her ceremonial diplomatic hunting-knife. Koth straight-armed the Czhan in the face and backed off, drawing his own sabre. Morweth ducked under a crazed swipe from a handful of pins while firing a spray of his own needles from a hingespring-loaded mechanism in his sleeve.

It was only later, reliving it, that Sareth sorted out his impressions of the subsequent scene, recalling how each of these actions should have seriously 97

wounded the attackers or even killed them: the Czhan's face was a mess, unpleasant things were falling out of the Dakhaari and the Saloi now had enough nerve toxins in him to kill a hauling-behemoth. But still they came on.

Sareth also noticed how each leader had, instinctively, for some reason, chosen to attack his or her own kind rather than anyone else.

And then there were his own emotions. On one level he had simply wanted to save his Administrator, which was after all the very function of his being –

but it was more complex than that. On another level he had realized what it would do to the peace talks to have Ravia and Koth die – but it went deeper than that.

Recollecting it later, he realized that he had wanted to save Ravia and Koth at any cost – and *more* than he had wanted to save Morweth. On some fun-damentallevel he had responded to Ravia and Koth as people in their own right. He liked them, and he didn't like the idea of the world he lived in being without them, and he quite simply didn't want them to die.

At the time, all of this flashed through his mind in a moment and he had no time to assimilate it – because by then he was colliding with them, attacker and attacked alike, aiming a boot at the knee of the Czhan with the sabre and inwardly cursing the fact that his secondary position in the Saloi hierarchy meant his boot was designed more for show than functionality.

Something he would never be able to identify pounded it him and slashed at his shoulder. He knew it couldn't be some Saloi implement, because he didn't drop dead instantly from blood-poisoning. He caught an impression of what was definitely the Saloi's glove swinging towards him – and then he was shoved, roughly, out of the way and the world dissolved into a chaos of blood and cracking bone and motion.

Once again, he was able to piece the specific impressions together again only later, from his memories.

Off to one side he was dimly aware of the prone figures of Ravia and

Koth, shoved out of the way like himself. He struggled upright from where he himself had fallen, and felt a gently restraining hand on his shoulder.

He vaguely recognized the Doctor, who said: ‘Lie still. You won’t be of any use to him.’

The explosion of violence was over even before the Doctor got to the ‘you’.

All that remained by then was a latent image of something black and ragged and impossibly fast tearing the attackers to pieces, and the instinctive pattern recognition of Morweth, the Assistant Sub-Administratorial Secretary Without Portfolio for the Pursuance of Internal and Local Sewerage Regulation and Common Hygiene.

Morweth?

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And then the realization that the attackers were scattered over an extremely wide area and that a thin, ragged-robed figure was lying amid the carnage.

Morweth.

Ravia and Koth were climbing groggily to their feet. From every side of the clearing appeared a mixed crowd of Saloi, Dakhaari and Czhanos guards, their fear, anger and panic dissolving into suspicion and puzzlement.

The Doctor took his hand from Sareth’s shoulder, and Sareth climbed to his own feet. He walked over to the supine Morweth in a kind of daze. The Administrator looked up at him. His skin was like greased paper stretched over a skull.

‘I am glad to have been of use, my Emperor,’ he said, and died.

Sareth’s mind was numb. Everybody was looking at him and he wanted them to stop doing it and go away.

‘It’s perfectly simple,’ the Doctor said to him. ‘The only surprising thing about it is that you never caught on. Didn’t you ever have the least suspicion?’

Sareth sat down, staining his robe on a bit of unidentifiable gore, and

waited for everybody to stop looking at him and go away.

‘What?’ he heard Ravla say, in a slightly mushy-sounding voice. It was as though his ears were stuffed with fibre wadding. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The classic triple-bluff,’ said the Doctor. ‘I guessed it from the first – from his obvious finery and speech patterns and his unconscious body language.

He was dressed as the epitome of an Emperor, but everybody knew the real power rested with Morweth. So in that context, what better concealment for the actual leader than to dress him exactly like one?’

Sareth closed his eyes and shook his head.

‘Do you mean,’ growled the voice of Koth, ‘that this has been yet another Saloi trick? That he has been deceiving us all along?’

‘Ah, now that’s the clever bit,’ said the Doctor. ‘He didn’t know. I suspect that few others did, apart from Morweth.’

‘So what exactly was Morweth?’ said the voice of Ravla.

‘A kind of cipher,’ said the Doctor. ‘Probably selected and trained from birth to be a blank personality with a few basic responses. If you saw them interact-ing you saw that Sareth used him as a kind of sounding-board, all unconscious that he was doing it. Every policy and order came from Sareth, channelled through what he thought of as his leader. The secondary function would be a bodyguard. You saw how he instantly transformed into a killing machine when his Emperor was actively threatened, and not when his own life was at risk.’

‘There was nothing inside Morweth?’ said Ravla.

‘Couldn’t you tell? The leadership issue is tied up – rather tiresomely, I might add – with all sorts of behavioural patterns: the subconscious urge for the alpha-being to mate with other alpha-beings whenever possible, to fight wherever not. It goes beyond conscious thought, sides in conflict or even gender and sexuality. I remember something of the sort happening towards the middle of the twentieth-century Earth, during what they called the Second World War: a kind of sublimated group-dynamic between the exclusively male global leaders that would have shocked and horrified them had they been

consciously aware of participating in it.

‘That repression of natural impulse was part of it, of course – as was the fact that they were culturally unable to see women as alpha-beings. The Greeks and Romans had some notion of the sexual, and indeed the homosexual, aspects of warfare and it informed how they waged it: but at the time of which I speak, two thousand years of the Christianity death cult resulted in the nega-tion and vilification of whole vast areas of human development – and one of the secondary effects was to make warfare all the more horrendous, all the more hypocritical and obscene. Their technology levels gave them power on an unprecedented scale, but they wielded it with all the morality and self-knowledge of a squalid little assault outside a public house.

‘But that’s neither here nor there. From the outside looking in, it was obvious that neither you nor Koth responded to Morweth in the slightest. His supposed subordinate, on the other hand, had you pawing at the ground, though neither of you consciously knew it.’

Sareth felt something patting rapidly at his cheek. He opened his eyes and looked up into the concerned face of the Doctor, the concern no less genuine for the little wicked twinkle of humour behind it.

‘Come on, old chap,’ the Doctor said. ‘Don’t you go blank on us now. We need you up and fully functioning. As it were.’

And outside the impassable energy field that encapsulated the Summit where ships waited, and around the tiny planet of Moriel where whole Fleets waited, and on the Homeworlds and annexed planets where entire populations waited, Dakhaari and Czhans and Saloi wondered what, precisely, was happening.

The official transmissions from the Summit, the transmissions sanctioned by the Hollow Gods, had been cut almost a *gik* ago.

Chapter Sixteen

Roz Forrester, aka Gunner Skana of the Glorious Czhanos Space army, swung herself into the canister and wrapped the elasticated crash-webbing about her, fastening it with complicated snaplocks that looked as if they could jam at the least provocation and were only barely preferable to being turned to eighty kilograms of strawberry jelly, even inside her combat suit.

A panel slammed down over her and she heard the crackle and hiss as the mechanetic welding arms welded it shut – the capsules were designed to fracture open on impact or not at all.

It was dark and even if she switched on her helmet lights she would see nothing but padding over steel plate. That didn't matter much. She had already seen the belt-feed full of other capsules into which the rest of the troops were climbing, the ejection mechanisms that would launch them from the carrier in almost exactly the same way as bullets from a machine-gun. The trick was in trying *not* to think about it.

When she had first encountered the mechanical technology here she had been reminded of the first time she and Chris Cwej had travelled with the Doctor, when they had found themselves stranded in a System with its own different and highly ridiculous physical laws. This was ridiculous in another way. In the System it had been the stupidity of ice-skating penguins and Disney physics. *This* was the stupidity of going over Niagara Falls in a barrel, or dumping active nuclear waste in the sea, or taking the kids along with you by way of a healthy lacing of strychnine in the Kool-aid.

It was an insanity grounded in the reality of iron and flesh and bone. The voice of the lemming was heard in the land and real people were dancing to it.

There was a lurch in her stomach as the carrier-ship skimmed the Moriel atmosphere. From the rather more extensive briefings Sergeant Vim had given after their one and only sight of an officer, Roz knew that the superstructures bolted to the ship were designed to diffuse sensors to the point of wide-band invisibility; nobody on either side, or on the planet below, would detect them.

This had not been much of a comfort to the troops.

The Hollow Gods knew all and saw all, and the consensus of opinion was that, suddenly, simply and quite spectacularly, they were all going to die. Roz wasn't very religious, for all that she was a member of what was nominally a 101

Church, and she hoped that all the recent praying and sacrifices and gestures of supplication were on a par with Henry V's hasty, pious backpedalling after the speech about how he was going to take the bloody French's balls back and shove them up 'em.

But the fear, if nothing else, among the other troops had been very

real – and she had responded to it. Her canister jolted and rattled down the belt, jolted again, and again, and again to the concussion of its fellows being ejected, and she had to bite her tongue to hold in a squeak of unthinking and irrational terror every time.

Kachunka-blam. 'Kachunka-blam! Kachunka- *blam*! Kachunka- *BLAM!*

Something slammed into her chest and shoved her back against the padding and then she was tumbling, head over heels over head over heels, turbulence rattling her bones apart at the joints, and then her stomach yawed. The capsule had skimmed a couple of upper strata of atmosphere like a flat stone on water, and now she was in free fall.

'Oh bugger. . . ' Little squeaks of unthinking and irrational terror were suddenly the least of her worries, so far as holding things back was concerned.

Cold sweat sprang from every pore. She found that she was panting.

She fell for a long time. Just at the point where she thought she was going to end up thinly but evenly coating the Moriel landscape, the first of the ribbon-

'chutes jettisoned and the sudden deceleration nearly fractured her spine. Two more 'chutes, a plunging sensation and the final impact. Roz blacked, out for a moment, and came out of it only when the explosive charges blew the capsule to pieces around her, turning it to shrapnel to deal with any unfriendly enemy elements who happened to be around.

Little was known about the surface conditions of Moriel, save that upper-stratosphere sampling showed the air was breathable. The surface itself was obscured from sight by cloud formations and from sensors by electromagnetics. Czhanos lore, passed down the generations from time out of mind, held that the planet was inhabited by a race called 'Plobs', but contained no hard information as to what these Plobs were. The purpose of this initial assault was to reconnoitre and to secure a beachhead for a more extensive landing.

Roz hauled herself out from the remains of her capsule and into –

She was in the sort of lush and verdant countryside that would not look out of place in a Constable – though if it were a Constable he'd have to arrest himself for using controlled substances and report himself to the Sargent.

Brightly-coloured little plants glowed like pastel jewels in the hedgerows and little woodland copses sighed and rustled in a gentle breeze.

It was the sort of place that patently had ‘copses’ rather than cops, and, as a thirtieth-century city girl born and bred, Roz Forrester was finding it very hard not to gag. To her lights there was something inherently sickly about it 102

to the point of instant diabetes.

Everything looked as though it were illuminated by bright sunlight. Even the complete cloud cover – which should have seen to it that the surface would be grey and dank – seemed to be entirely of cloud-castle cumulus and scintillated like mother-of-pearl.

This was probably the effect of the rainbow – arcing across the sky, whichever way you looked. No doubt some optical illusion secondarily produced by whatever was primarily producing the sunlight effect.

Roz activated a chin-panel in her helmet to cut in some polarization, and scanned the landscape, pinboard-analogue readouts helping her to spot the remains of other canisters and the troopers originally in them. She wound up the mechanisms of her servo-assist, and raced to the figure who had been tagged as ‘1934-2675-0481 SKANA’.

Chris Cwej was tracking his rifle about himself cautiously. It was impossible to see his face through his helmet, but his posture showed that he was a little shaken. ‘I’m not sure I like this, Roz,’ he said as she arrived. – ‘I keep thinking the trees are going to grow friendly cartoon faces.’

‘I’d have thought you’d be in your element,’ said Roz. ‘Maybe if we hang on long enough we can find some happy lovely fluffy bunnies for you to be friends with.’

‘Yes, well,’ said Chris. ‘You can have too much of a good thing.’

The receivers in their ears crackled.

‘Okay, men,’ said the voice of Sergeant Vim. ‘Take a mark from my flare and fall in.’

Under the rainbow and in bright sunlight that seemed to have no source, the squad of Czhanos troopers prowled along a Moriel country lane, combat reflexes ready for anything. But the only movement was

of small animals in the hedgerows; the only sound was of what looked like four-winged birds chirruping in the trees.

Sergeant Vim seemed to be feeling the strain.

‘’Snot right,’ he muttered, more or less to himself masking his uncertainty with sullen belligerence. ‘Something very wrong here. Can’t trust it. Have to watch out for dirty alien Enemy *tricks*. . . ’

The general feeling of the troops, on the other hand, was of simple relief that they hadn’t been blasted by thunderbolts or just dropped dead for so much as daring to land on this forbidden world.

Gunner Pchaprotz was the one who put it into words. ‘Um, maybe the Hollow Gods want it preserved as a holy place of peace and tranquillity, sarge?’

he suggested. ‘Maybe we’re okay so long as we don’t hurt or kill anything, something like that?’

‘Don’t you *ever* talk like that, boy,’ the Sergeant growled. ‘Three reasons why that ain’t so.’ He paused for a moment and shouldered his impact-rifle to count briefly on his exo-gauntleted fingers. ‘One (1), the Hollow Gods don’t *do* things like that; two (2), such a world would have been put under the peaceful and enlightened Protection of Czhanos from the start; and three (3), such a world wouldn’t make everybody who looked at it instantly want to scream obscenities and blast everything on it to the Multiple Hells.’

‘I’m with you there, sergeant,’ said Roz Forrester over her comms link, from where she and Cwej were guarding the rear.

‘Quite right too, Gunner Verkog,’ said Sergeant Vim. ‘So let’s have no more of this “peace and tranquillity” talk, Pchaprotz. That could easily mean a Court Martial for being a Poof in the Face of the Enemy, do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, sarge,’ said Gunner Pchaprotz.

At that point there came a call from one of the scouts who made up the vanguard – a beefy Czhanos female of the same sort that Chris Cwej was so successfully impersonating.

‘We’re coming up on something,’ she said. ‘Looks like a kinda

settlement.'

Sergeant Vim motioned the squad forward until they reached the vanguard and took cover, training the optical-enhancement gear of their helmets forward.

Kilometres ahead of them, across the rolling countryside and spread over a large mound that looked too regular to be anything other than artificial, was a little village. There were higgledy-piggledy little thatched cottages in baby blue and sunshine yellow and peppermint green and pretty pink. From the portly little chimneys came lazily twisting curls of smoke. There were little gardens with flowers and whitewashed crossbar garden gates. There were plump little shapes moving between them, almost indistinguishable at this distance, but from their bouncy movements you just knew their voices were going to be high and squeaky and giggly.

As one, the troopers began to, growl along with Sergeant Vim.

'This is going to be a walkover, boys,' the Sergeant said. 'We do it quick, we do it hard and we can do it without a –'

'Is you *soldier* boys?' said a squeaky little voice behind them.

As one, again, the squad swung round, bringing up their impact-rifles.

Standing there was a plump little creature, its head barely up to their midriffs. It was furry and it had three bright little eyes and it was wearing what, to Roz, looked like a pair of yellow child's dungarees.

'Is you soldier boys?' it said again. It didn't seem suspicious; it just wanted to know who these interesting new people were.

Sergeant Vim stepped forward and looked down at it. 'Why, of course not,'

he said in a voice oozing teeth-gritted insincerity. 'We're a. . . we're a concert 104

party. That's what we are. Here to entertain you.'

Several of the troops were drawing a bead on the little creature with their impact-rifles. Oblivious, it bounced up and down and clapped its pawlike hands.

'Oh joy!' it squeaked. 'Oh joy and happy day! Not-soldier-boys have

come to entertain all us happy Plobs in Plobtown!' It grinned at the troopers with sharp little needle teeth. 'Is Happy Plob me. Thatsa *name*.' It prodded itself with a finger, then waved a paw frantically in the direction of the settlement.

'And is Silly Plob, and Bouncy Plob, and Grumpy Plob – but isn't really – and is Wavy Plob and is Humorous Plob, and is. . . '

'Tell me,' Roslyn Forrester, aka gunner Verkog, said to nobody in particular.

'Has anyone here ever heard the name Mai Lai?'

'Thought you were soldier boys,' the Plob continued, looking sidelong at Sergeant Vim with child-confidentiality, "cause there's lots of soldier boys.

Over there.' It pointed dramatically to several nearby areas of woodland.

'Lots and lots of soldier boys and they look just like you.'

The entire squad hit the springy turf as though pole-axed, fired up the sensors of their suits and scanned the targets the still-standing little Plob had indicated.

'He's right, sarge,' Gunner Pchaprotz said worriedly as he stared at his readouts. 'I'm getting readings from servo-powered equipment similar to our own, but with distinct variations in the pattern-signature. I think it's the Dakhaari and the Saloi!'

Chapter Seventeen

Benny Surprise Summerfield woke in a bedroom of a Makrath boarding war-ren with a head like an inviable biological experiment and a sense of impending doom. Not quite in the sense that something horrible is going to happen –

because a nasty little voice inside you is saying that it already has happened.

It's just that you're going to remember it in a moment.

She half slid, half fell, from the bed and stumbled over to the wash-stand –

she had given up trying to see her environment in qualified terms, a quasi-this, an analogue of that. True, the bed consisted of swirls of what appeared to be chiffon and felt like silk suspended by some form of static, springy anti-gravity field rather than a mattress; true the basin appeared to be semi-organic and evolved rather than manufactured. But given a carbon-based, bipedal, broadly humanoid lifeform there are certain basic constants the universe over, and a bed was something you slept in and a wash-stand was something that you washed in, like as not with plumbing.

The plumbing gurgled and glopped as she ran water over her wrists from the tubular and slightly dubious-looking spigot; the sound reverberated through her head as though in an echo chamber via ears stuffed with cotton wadding soaked with ether. An idea was forming in her head and Benny put it together piece by laborious piece. Something to do with the night before.

Ah, yes. That was it.

A bed was something you slept in, and a wash-stand was something you washed in, and drinks were something you got pissed out of your head on and then did something incredibly stupid that you regretted for the rest of your pitiful, sad and extraordinarily miserable life.

Several star systems from Jaris, one of the two functioning engines had given out, and they had been forced to set down on their last remaining, on the desert planet of Makrath.

The spaceport mechanic, a fluorescent yellow humanoid with displaced ears and in cloth-of-chromium overalls, had looked the dysfunctional engine up and down and said something that Benny didn't need to know the language to recognize as the local equivalent of, 'Oh dear me, squire, this is going to cost you.'

To Benny's surprise Jason had expansively appeared to agree.

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'I thought you didn't have any cash,' she said as they went through the tunnels that led to the subterranean settlement.

'We don't.' Jason shouldered his holdall, in which he had packed several useful pieces of equipment. 'We can get some now, though. The action on Jaris was just your basic agricultural stuff. Makrath on the other hand, is one of the gaming centres of the known Cluster.'

They walked out of the tunnel and into the flashing lights and crowds and music of a Las Vegas with a lid on.

Outside an edifice that looked like an animated cybernetic octopus with fifteen arms and a severe case of rhinestone boils, Jason unclasped the fasten-ings on his holdall. He strapped a little hotwired electronic unit to his forearm and connected it via cabling to an electrostatic band on his wrist. He strapped a unit of some other design to his right ankle. He unzipped his leather jacket and secured a clockwork computing unit to his midriff with a roll of tape. He took a small item like a pocket calculator ergonomically designed for someone with eleven fingers and slipped it into a pocket. He popped a rather suspiciously chunky pair of eyeglasses with a switch on them over his eyes.

'Okay,' he said. 'Let's make some money.'

With Benny trailing behind he strolled jauntily into the gaming establishment – where several large, armed and armoured security-things ran detectors over them, took hold of them and immediately frogmarched them into the seclusion and privacy of a secure and soundproofed cell.

There were little sluice-channels in the floor and every surface was specifically designed to be hosed clean.

'What,' said Benny, a couple of hours later, 'was all that about?'

Jason shrugged and snapped his fingers for the waiter-thing, who arrived immediately with a globular flask of something chilled and green. 'That,'

he said, tipping the waiter-thing expansively with a handful of plaques, 'was business.'

After they had waited fifteen minutes in the cell – more than long enough for Benny to decide that there was no way out except possibly feet first and in bits – a very small, very neat, very assured humanoid had appeared. The guard-things left them alone with him – and when Benny looked into his insect eyes she decided that, on the whole, she would rather the guard-things had stayed.

Jason, however, who had spent the time leaning back on one of the hard-backed chair-equivalents and whistling, had promptly bounced to his feet and begun proudly showing off all the devices strapped to

him – showing the humanoid precisely how they operated, dealing out dominoes and throwing tesseroidal die onto the sharp-edged metal table.

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He had then stripped the items off and laid them out on the table. There then followed an involved conversation of which Benny couldn't catch a word – and then the little humanoid had put a hand inside his glittery suit and pulled out a large stack of money-plaques.

Then Benny and Jason had simply walked out, at which point Jason had opined that a drink would not at this point go amiss after all that en-trepreneurial effort, and preferably one he could metabolize; so they had repaired to a cavern-like chamber filled with happy revellers, in which naked people of a variety of species swung energetically from the ceiling.

Now Jason took a swallow of the green stuff and Benny did likewise. It tasted like jet-propelled melon juice.

'Places like Makrath,' Jason explained, 'are owned by the seriously big boys.

There's no way you can win if you're a punter, and anybody who apparently does is on a salary. For publicity purposes. Likewise they've got the service industries totally sewn up, worse even than the Citadel franchises; you try dealing or hustling here and they cut you off at the knees, or the elbows, or wherever else is applicable; and they do it instantly. No warnings. No second chance.

'On the other hand, you can pick up a little freelance work by taking something to them – the specs for a fab new space drug, say, or the latest variation on a foolproof winning system. Me, I have a small knack for these little elec-tromechanical cheats. It probably comes from remembering a bit of how electronics worked on Earth and putting it together with the available technology here.'

Benny took another little sip of her drink, refilled her drinking bowl and noticed in passing how the flask was now for some strange reason nearly empty.

I thought you were going to try to use them to try to –' She stopped for a moment to work out precisely where she had gone wrong. 'Win.'

'Nah. Like I said, there's no way.' Jason ordered a couple more flasks.

‘So, if you come up with a new way to win, you take it to them and they pay you not to use it.’

‘Strikes me,’ said Benny, pouring, ‘that it would be cheaper simply to kill you. Me. Us.’

‘Now that’s the clever bit.’ Jason grinned. ‘Take that little wrist thing I built.

Now they’re going to copy it and sell it through various blind channels to every sorry loser in the Cluster who wants to change his luck. Meanwhile, it’s now useless, and by the time the sorry losers learn it they’ve lost the lot and are jumping out of airlocks on broken legs. Everybody who matters is happy –

and the big boys tend to keep the people who can come up with stuff they can use like that alive.’

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Benny looked at him. ‘You really are shameless, aren’t you? You have no shame.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Jason. ‘You can’t eat shame.’

The drinks had continued to arrive and the conversation had drifted onto other matters. Possibly it was association, possibly it was the effect of the unfamiliar secondary alcohols and esters which can turn even the most case-hardened of ethanol heads in unfamiliar and sometimes dangerous directions, but Benny had found herself feeling obscurely guilty. In the need of some slight degree of confession: the degree at which one must explain and justify certain oversimplifications and contradictions that might otherwise, to someone else, who doesn’t fully understand the complexity of the truth, be easily mistaken for lies.

She told Jason the slightly truer version of how she had evaded active service in Spacefleet and had wound up professing to archeological qualifications and distinctions that she had no real right to claim.

‘It’s so easy to fall into the glib and automatic stories,’ she said finally. ‘It even goes back to my parents. I mean, my mother was killed by the Dalek plasma strafing, but my father was long-since gone. I never even knew him.

Not really. He went away.’

Jason fmished offhis drink and refilled his bowl. ‘Lucky you,’ he said flatly.

‘What?’ said Benny.

She felt a sudden iciness in the pit of her stomach. How could she have been so stupid? On some unthinking level she had started to open up and extend some soft and fragile tendrils of fellowship with this man, and he had simply chopped them off without a thought.

‘What?’ she said again, softly.

‘Lucky you,’ he said again.

Suddenly, overwhelmingly, Benny just wanted to hit him; pound that snide and self-satisfied face into bloody oblivion.

‘Have you any idea what it’s like?’ she said, shaky with barely suppressed atavistic rage. ‘To grow up without father? To never even know what a –’

‘Take it from me, you’re well out of it,’ Jason said. ‘Let me tell you about fathers –’

‘Oh yes, he beat you. You poor dear. I forgot. At least you *had* one.’

‘I’m not talking about the odd backhander,’ Jason said quietly. ‘I mean the real number. Sustained and ritualized.’

He drained his bowl again in a single swallow and gave one of his patented Jason Kane unconcerned shrugs – and you’d have to be looking extremely closely at the time, and remembering it later, years later, to realize that it was an absolutely and perfectly controlled copy of one.

‘Y’know it really used to piss me off how that word was taken away from the real people,’ he said. ‘Ritualized. Some sad, me-too screw-up goes to some robber of a therapist, whines for half an hour about what a screw-up they are and the next thing you know they’re on daytime bloody chat shows telling how their parents were togged up in cowls and staking them out in the woods for Baal or something.

‘This was more what you’d call ritualistic in the psychotic-compulsive sense – I read up on it a little, later, on account of how you might say

I had a vested interest – and believe me you don't forget it. You wish you could. It's inside you all the time and it never stops.

'The guy had all these little ritual systems of crime and punishment, and he'd go through them coldly and clinically, like it was more in sorrow than in anger. They were the sort of things that you could work out the crazy logic of them afterwards, but you could never see them coming up. I remember when, once a day, every day for three days, he told little Lucy that he had seen her touching herself in a bad place and that she was going to be corrected.

'Now Lucy's something like six; she hasn't got a clue what he's talking about – but she knows him. She's terrified for weeks, but nothing happens, or at least nothing specific to that, and we more or less forget about it.'

Benny suddenly noticed how the tenses and constructions kept chopping around and that Jason didn't seem to be aware of doing it. She suddenly wanted to touch him, just make simple human contact, but she couldn't think of a way to do it without being misunderstood.

Jason was looking down at his hands unseeing as they gripped his forgotten bowl white-knuckled, speaking in the quiet and precise but slightly dreamy monotone of those whose cortical sensors have been ethanolically cut. He was just spilling everything out, without volition, reliving and articulating it as it came.

'And then the school holidays started. He has more time to play about with her before people have to see her. Over three days, once a day, at the exact time every day, he breaks one of her fingers. Pops the joints with a mallet and a chisel with the cutting edge blunted with masking tape.'

Benny's own drinking bowl bruised her lips a little as her hands flew to her mouth. She had forgotten she was holding it.

'He does it late in the evening,' Jason said quietly, 'just in case his train's delayed. The fact that it's always at the exact same time was part of it. He does it very carefully and he makes her keep ice packs on them and pops an extra one as an afterthought, so when he finally takes her to casualty he can get away with saying he slammed the car door on them.'

He suddenly looked up from his drink at Benny and grinned coldly. There was nothing much behind his eyes.

‘Casualty did a lot of business round our way. I suppose if we were living in some scummy Peckham housing estate straight off *The Bill* we’d have had the social services spilling out our ears the first time I fell down the stairs. But, as you so kindly pointed out, we were nice and white and middle-class – and the nice, white middle classes aren’t supposed to *do* stuff like that, what with being stuffed full to bursting with the good old-fashioned family values and shit. The mechanisms to detect and deal with it weren’t in place.’

Jason shrugged. ‘It wasn’t that big a thing, going through it; it was just life.

I suppose the worst thing was Mum. I mean, looking back, she was getting her share and she was, like, permanently shell-shocked and when you come down to it what could she *do*, right? But when you’re a kid she’s one of the two most powerful people in the world, like a goddess or something, and when she doesn’t save you and even covers up for him it’s like she’s collaborating.

The guy was a bastard and screw him, but with your mum it’s like love and hate mixed up inside you, yeah?

And then, of course, sometimes he’d just totally lose it. It’s like a sketch from this old comedy show I remember them repeating; a bunch of Marxist activists or whatever they were reading *Das Kapital* for a couple of minutes and then going sod it, let’s just kill somebody. Big joke.

‘Sometimes he’d just blow his top and lay into anything and everything within reach. In the end he went for my mother with a newspaper. It wasn’t like I tried to stop him or anything. I was just in the way and – ‘

‘What?’ Benny said. ‘He went for her with a *newspaper*?’

‘If you roll it really tight it’s like a punching weapon. Do it right and you can punch it through a plank. It’s like a trick to deal with muggers and he’d carry one whenever he went to work – like he was going to get mugged between Liverpool Street Station and Bank.

‘So anyway, that night I looked at my face in the mirror and felt the soft bits in my side and looked down into the blood in the toilet bowl and that was it. I suppose I could have stuck the bastard with a kitchen knife and buried him under the patio or something, but I just

walked out of the house, walked five miles to the nearest town and hopped onto the last train of the night.' He frowned as though mildly puzzled. 'I didn't even pack. I left Mum and little Lucy with him. I shouldn't have done that. I should have looked out for her. I was nearly thirteen, she was only nine.'

For some while Jason sat immobile, staring into his empty bowl. He just seemed puzzled rather than anything else.

Eventually Benny said: 'Look when I said, I didn't mean to. . . '

Jason shook his head as if to clear it, shuddered a little, shrugged yet again and looked up and grinned easily. 'Hey, don't worry about it. You weren't to know.'

* * *

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And now, some nine hours later, Benny splashed cold water on her face and tried to stop her mind from shying away from fragmented, disjointed, horrify-ing memories. They had got seriously drunk after that. She recalled flashes of them going to another bar, and another, and getting lost in one of the rougher areas of the underground settlement and stumbling into one of the seedier boarding establishments and making it to a room and then somehow they were kissing, bodies grinding desperately together as they worked each other with their hands and tore each other's clothes.

As a seasoned long-time drinker Benny was familiar with the process by which one wakes up with one's drinking companion and a suspiciously blank memory. The horrible worry of what it was that one actually did.

But the body-memory, which always knows, knows that all that really happened was a collapse onto the bed, a little insipid and friendly and half-hearted fumbling and then a collapse into zonked-out sleep. This is why the subsequent conversations are generally so civilized and amiable.

But this time Benny's body-memory was telling her that this, extensively and categorically, had not been the case. Friendly and half-hearted was not in fact going to be an option. Adjectives like ferocious, violent, convulsive and multiple were probably going to be more apposite.

In the sweat-encrusted bed Jason stirred and murmured something unintel-ligible. And then he woke up and started to remember, too.

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Chapter Eighteen

It was later.

The atmosphere inside the Summit was one of barely contained paranoia. The attack upon all three leaders by those seemingly of their own kind had shocked all those there. None of their systems of agents and spies had so much as hinted that something like this was being planned, by whichever party.

The diplomatic processes of the Summit continued. The ubiquitous and omnipresent automata still discreetly served each delegation's needs. People upon all levels still went through the motions of meeting with and talking to and learning about each other – but it was as though this had now become mere background. In the upper minds of all remained the question of exactly who had instigated this new factor. Who were they? What did they intend?

And just what, ultimately, did they want?

Sareth found himself sitting against a tree bole in the jungle chamber where Morweth had died. There was no evidence of this battle now. Several automata had arrived and started to clean up the mess, until the Doctor had shooed them away and detailed a mixed party of Saloi, Dakhaari and Czhans to put the mess into little bags and keep it safe, for later. The Time Lord had assumed command with such a casual assurance that nobody had thought twice before jumping to obey him, and wondered about it only afterwards.

Afterwards, of course, he had reverted to the bumbling little apparent fool he had always been. Sareth was really going to have to think about that –

how the man managed to perform the same trick over and over again, and still, somehow, get away with it every time.

But that was only one of the things Sareth had to think about.

'You had it easy, Morweth,' he muttered to himself before realizing that he was still emotionally thinking of the late Administrator as having been the leader in a real sense. It was obvious now, now it had

been pointed out. He could see how the process had operated and who was really in control. Who was still in control. Remember that.

The problem, now that he knew it, was that he had no idea how he was supposed to function. For most of his adult life Sareth had led from behind, freed from the responsibility and ultimate accountability – even to himself –

and now both had landed on him like a ton of tangled fire irons: an utterly 115

unexpected, heavy but above all *complex* weight that must surely crush him for all its apparent and contrived intricacy.

He didn't know how to act, and the other Saloi in the delegation didn't know how to act towards him. Some of them had instantly become humble to their Emperor even to the point of servility, even though their relative positions hadn't changed. It was simply that the stratum *above* Sareth had suddenly been taken away. He was now the head of the hierarchical pimple.

The bathos of the thought made him smile a little despite himself An Emperor was probably supposed to think in terms of 'The Brightest Jewel in the Glittery Night' or some such lofty metaphor. But that wasn't really his style.

It was the sort of thing he had made up for Morweth to say – and he was damned if he was going to say things like that under his own name.

It occurred to him, then, that for most of his life he had been thinking and doing and saying things *for* somebody. Possibly it was not time to start doing things for –

It was like a light going on in his head. All the vast and unmanning complex-ities fell away to leave a single thought. It was a simple thought, laughably simple, and it went:

I'm the Emperor.

I can do what I damned well like.

And if anyone else doesn't like it then they can damned well assassinate me. Which they're probably going to do the first chance they get, so I'd better make the most of it while I've got the *chance*.

Sareth was a little startled to find that, lost in the morass of his thoughts, he had somehow made his way from the jungle chamber and across the Saloi quadrant to his apartments – not the spartan chamber in which he had served his previous function, but the opulent apartments that had been established for show, which he had hardly ever seen the inside of, let alone used.

Outside the doors leading into them, he reached up to the ceiling with his ceremonial diplomatic Athame – originally Morweth's, but it had been pressed upon him by the other two rulers – and hammered on a simulated air-conditioning duct.

'Hoi!' he shouted. 'You in there! Go and get your friends and mount a proper guard.'

There was a brief pause, and then a muffled and slightly confused voice said: 'Sorry, my Emperor?'

'No need to be sorry,' Sareth replied. 'You heard what I said. All this skulking around might have been all right when I wasn't going to suddenly find myself on the wrong end of it, but right now I want to keep you oily little buggers where I can *see* you.'

He pondered for a moment, then came to the conclusion that the art of leadership was more or less the art of delegation. 'You all have some idea of what an Emperor expects, so sort it out for yourselves and give it to me. I'll let you know if you've got it wrong. You have a *jiik*.'

And it'll probably be a hingespring-fired needle through the left eyeball, he thought with a kind of manic cheerfulness.

He flung back his doors and entered the apartments, finding himself in a splendid septagonal anteroom, walled with lapis lazuli, from which doors led off in every direction. Sareth recalled that one door led to some extremely extensive dressing rooms, and he gave a little thought to what he, personally, would like to wear.

Preferably something the wind didn't whistle up.

In the company of a pair of burly warrior-caste Dakhaari bodyguards, Ravla made her cautious way through the Saloi quadrant towards Sareth's apartments. The sudden shift in power – if it in fact was a shift – had opened up new uncertainties, new possibilities, and she

was determined to make the most of them.

The Saloi she encountered here seemed confused, having somehow lost a little of the poise that was so characteristic of them. This was surprising in itself – but the biggest surprise was the simple fact of how many Saloi she encountered. Ravla knew from her spies that to find a Saloi walking openly about the quadrant was an event in itself Ravla recognized some of these spies but had no opportunity to confer with them, and they seemed to be as confused as the rest.

The two large Saloi who led her minimal party through the quadrant had their cowls back to show their faces and their shaven heads, and they seemed extremely uncomfortable about it. At length they came to Sareth's doors and one of them knocked tentatively.

'Queen Ravla of the Dakhaar Empire cordially requests an audience with the Emperor,' he said, without raising his voice, in the Elevated Tongue.

The doors opened instantly, and a small cowled Saloi ushered them into the anteroom. 'The Emperor is dressing,' she said.

Ravla, who was responsive to such things, received the distinct impression that the Saloi girl was definitely regretful that the Emperor was dressing.

There was a breathless quality to her voice and a certain smell about her that had several of Ravla's reactions and impulses firing blindly in sympathy. Just what exactly, she wondered, had been happening here?

At this point another, male, Saloi came out of a door, hurriedly wrapping his cloak about him. It was a perennial question throughout the Three Empires 117

as to what a Saloi wore under his or her cloak, and in this case the answer was absolutely nothing.

'The Emperor will see you now,' he said. Ravla caught a moment of warm, unspoken communion between the male Saloi and the girl, and then they both slipped out through a side door leaving an interested Ravla, a pair of grinning Dakhaari warrior-caste bodyguards and a couple of blushing and very embarrassed Saloi guards.

'Well,' said Ravla, smiling silkily at the Saloi to embarrass them even further.

‘I suppose we’d better go in.’

They were again stopped from entering for the moment, however, by the sudden egress of more Saloi, in various states of increasingly bizarre costume, one of them leading a somewhat startled-looking food animal on a halter.

Ravia, who was at heart a conventional girl, with healthy if slightly overen-thusiastic appetites, found herself staring at this last one, and what it was wearing. She was angry to find herself blushing olive green to her roots.

Eventually the small party were allowed to enter. It was the bedchamber.

Sareth looked up from where he was sitting on the edge of the huge bed in leather breeks and lacing up a heavy pair of combat boots similar to those worn by the combat-active troops of all three races throughout the Empires.

‘Hello,’ he said, smiling. ‘You’re going to have to bear with us. We’re none of us quite sure about this Emperor business so we’re having to make it all up as we go along.’

In a chamber in the Czhanos quadrant, Koth looked at a bank of monitors showing the movement of forces around Moriel and along the battle lines in three directions. Banks of receivers babbled soft radio traffic, force-channelled into the exclusion zone on a tight beam. Koth had taken a minimum logistics team with him to the Summit, and the equipment here was in fact remarkably similar to that brought along by Sareth of the Saloi and indeed Ravla of the Dakhaari.

That business with Sareth, he thought, a little chagrined despite himself.

It had been right under his nose and he hadn’t spotted it. How many plans would have to be rethought because of it?

For the moment, though, he was more interested in the plans that were past the point of no return. He wanted a check on the status of his forces on Moriel, and those who would even now be attempting to enter the forbidden zone around the Summit. If either survived, they would need to know something of what was happening here.

Koth turned his attention back to the console-operator he was speaking with. ‘There’s no way we can get a message to them?’

The operator pulled his headphones from his head. ‘No way at all. We can pick the force transmissions up, but there’s nothing going out. Even the official transmission seems to be down.’ The operator looked up at Koth worriedly.

‘Should they really be trying to come here?’

‘They’re doing it on my orders,’ said Koth.

‘But the Hollow –’

‘The Hollow Gods would make it known if they were displeased, lad,’ Koth said. ‘What they don’t wish to happen doesn’t happen, it’s as simple as that.

Till then, we will proceed as we see fit.’

‘But you never know what the bastards really want until –’

The operator – and every other operator within earshot put their hands to their heads and ducked with an involuntary squeak of fear at this blasphemy, and even Koth was deeply shocked. It was not that such blasphemy was entirely unknown – Koth himself had cursed the intransigence of the Hollow Gods in the privacy of his own head on occasion – it was simply that, for an instant, it had slipped out casually, as if the Hollow Gods were nothing at all.

It was the work of that damned Doctor and his bloody workshops. Koth noted that everybody else here had instinctively nipped quickly out of the blast radius around the luckless operator, as Koth had done himself.

Wrathful discharges of insubstantial energy, however, were conspicuously failing to evidence themselves. It was an article of faith that anyone uttering blasphemy aloud would be instantly transformed into a charred and smoking stain – but for some reason this did not seem to be happening. And, as the other operators now crept cautiously back to their posts, he saw in several faces that some of them were coming to more or less the same conclusion.

One of them, a wiry and capable female, of the sort that in the Empires commonly formed the apex in a female-female-male clan arrangement, even went so far as to open her mouth tentatively. . .

‘Look at it this way, lass,’ he said to her. ‘I know what you’re thinking, but is it really worth taking the risk?’

It was slightly later, and Ravla and Sareth were seated on cushions, holding conference while the Saloi and Dakhaari guards looked on, one of each pair taking dictation for what was after all supposed to be a formal diplomatic meeting.

‘. . . the situation is a little fluid at the moment,’ Sareth was saying. ‘I mean, everyone’s still in shock, to a certain extent – but the moment they aren’t they’re going to fall back into the traditional structures, and having an Emperor actually here is the last thing they’ll want. I’d advise you to start cultivating the people who are going to be in control *after* they knock me off.’

‘But that’s what I’m saying,’ said Ravla. ‘If you ally yourself with Dakhaar, we can ensure that you. . . ’

She faltered, briefly, losing the thread of her argument.

She was staring at him again, and she didn’t want to, and she didn’t want him to see that she didn’t want to, and all the time he was watching her watching him and he –

Ravla, perhaps for the first time in her life, found herself flustered and confused. She had speculated idly about Sareth before, but that had been in an entirely different context. He had been a possible gambit in negotiations with the Saloi, or at least a possible light and enjoyable diversion, Nothing that particularly mattered.

Now he sat there easily, in a leather jerkin, breeks and boots that fitted with the sloppy perfection that comes from having simply picked the correct items of clothing without thinking about it. And the body inside them was panther-lithe; she could sense the coil and muscle of it.

He was younger than she had expected, slightly younger than herself – but it was not the age or his physicality that disturbed her. It was the power of him. It blazed out of him. It was as though the death of Morweth and the discovery of his true nature had served as a catalyst, unleashing something of which he himself had never consciously been aware. It was that entirely focused and slightly crazed quality that has people quite simply adoring it, and jumping to obey it, and stopping only later to wonder why.

It was the same quality, she realized, that she had detected within Koth.

Did she possess it too? She had come here ready to take advantage of the uncertainty and weakness of this new Saloi leader – and found that he was every bit her equal at the very least. For all his talk of impending assassination he was utterly in control – and if he had come this far, this soon, what would he be like in *giks* or years to come?

All of this flashed across her mind in an instant – and with it, in the way that the mind tends to pull the rug out from under one at such times, came a flash of personal insight.

For all her life, with the exception of her father before she killed him, she had never come into contact with anything other than inferiors, with minions.

There was Koth, of course, and latterly the Doctor. But one was a known quantity – she had always known that the Czhans had a ruler comparable to herself and had developed strategies to deal with it – and the other might as well be a Hollow God. But now she had suddenly, unexpectedly, come across a being who was every bit her equal from a completely different quarter, and she didn't quite know how to cope.

Sareth sat forward slightly with a creak of leather and regarded her with eyes that saw, precisely, her unspoken thoughts.

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And he comprehended, precisely, every level and aspect of their conversation, and the offers that were not being overtly talked about.

'I think,' he said, 'that an alliance at this point might not be in my best interests. Thank you for your kind approach, but I'm afraid I must decline.'

After Ravla had gone, Sareth called in the members of his staff and thanked them for the part they had played in the little charade. Then he sat for a while, trying to collect his thoughts – which wasn't easy since they oscillated wildly from finding the Dakhaari queen desperately attractive to her frightening the life out of him.

After a while, he turned to the figure who had slipped unobtrusively out from behind the drapes behind him and said: 'I don't know if that

was what you wanted. I have no idea of what you're ultimately aiming for.'

'You did it very well,' said the Doctor. 'And don't worry, Sareth. All will become clear shortly. I think the times for obfuscation are coming to an end.'

He grinned, suddenly, and tipped his hat. 'I've tried hard at it, but I don't think passivity is really my *metier*.'

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Chapter Nineteen

And throughout the Three Empires populations waited vainly for some news of what was happening in the Summit. On the Homeworlds various factions readied themselves to take power the moment it was confirmed that their rulers were dead – they were restrained from doing so immediately only by the fact that, should the leaders survive, they would be coming back with the bulk of each Empire's military forces and were likely to be a little short-tempered with any impudent usurper. So, for the moment these ambitious factions watched and waited, and squabbled with each other in the way such factions do.

And, strung along the front lines of the border zones, Dakhaari, Czhanos and Saloi forces faced each other, trained their death-ray blasters and space torpedoes at each other. It would take a single spark to blow the stalemate apart like a three-way Chinese firework.

The Czhanos dreadnought *Nadir Star* made its cautious way under half power into the exclusion zone surrounding the Summit. It carried a skeleton crew of volunteers, and every weapon and auxiliary system that could be automated had been automated. This a compromise between wasting lives unnecessarily and needing effective killpower, should by some miracle those entering the forbidden space not be instantly fried by individually personalized thunderbolts.

It is a truism that 'volunteers' for suicide missions tend to be young men without family responsibilities, and this is held to imply some sense of responsibility and even respect by military hierarchies for those under their command. In fact, of course, it just means that young and inexperienced men don't have the common sense to take a sharp step backwards when someone says: 'Volunteers for a suicide mission take one step forward.'

Captain Rator an Salth, however, was of a different stripe. Of mature

middle years, with a face lined by experience and scar tissue, in place of the vast and glittering array of medals worn by the majority of so-called 'officers' he wore the discreet vine-leaf sigil of a true fighting officer in the Glorious Czhanos Space Army – and his only regret was that the *Nadir Star* wasn't packed to the gunwales with examples of the former breed. Rator an Salth firmly believed that the sudden shrieking death of most of the officer classes could only make the universe a cleaner place.

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Salth had fought alongside Koth in the coup that had established him, and knew that the Supreme Commander trusted him, implicitly, with his life. It was for this reason that Salth had been chosen for this mission.

'If I'm not out in a *gik* I probably won't be coming out at all,' he had said in his quarters on Czhanos, where they had been discussing the Hollow Gods'

strange commands and what they might mean. 'Not alive, in any case. Hollow Gods or no, if you survive I want you to find out the truth of things and take it back. Then you take such action you see fit. And then you seed the ground with salt.'

Now Salth sat on the bridge of his ship, directing the helmsmen as they took it towards the Summit. Their collective relief at not dying upon entering the exclusion zone had been replaced by puzzlement.

Quite simply, there did not seem to be anything here.

'I'm getting a readout,' the sensor operator said suddenly. He was a young and grey-skinned soldier who had originally come from the planet of Shivri.

'Something solid, but it's nowhere near the size we're looking for. It's frag-mentary, too.' He sounded worried.

'Can we get visual confirmation?' Salth asked.

The operator switched the big display that dominated the bridge to relay input from telescopic cameras: black space and starlight. Something small and gleaming in the centre. 'I can enhance that mechanetically.'

'Make it so,' said Captain Salth.

The display clacked briefly and the image expanded and resolved itself.

‘What the Hells?’ Salth exclaimed.

Floating, on the display, as though derelict, were the bulks of a Czhanos dreadnought, a Dakhaari Warship and a Saloi Stiletto, the ships that had ferried the various delegations here.

There was no sign of anything else.

Down on Moriel, Sergeant Vim crawled over to the nearest trooper who, like the rest, had hit the dirt upon discovering other hostile forces in the area.

‘You. Fire a grenade round into that clump of bushes. Blow the whole damned pack of ’em into the Multiple Hells.’

The trooper remained immobile.

‘You *hear* me, soldier?’ Vim growled.

The trooper seemed to come to a decision. A new firmness seemed to come about his manner and he raised himself slightly on his elbows.

‘I cannot do it,’ he said, heroically. ‘For I am in fact Lieutenant Rorith Maas of the Saloi Xeno-Intelligence Corp and I will not fire upon my own kind. But my name and rank is all you’ll get from me!’

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There was a quiet crunch and a hiss from inside his helmet and Lieutenant Rorith Maas of Saloi Xeno-Intelligence Corp fell forward in death, snapping off a quick Saloi salute before he did so.

‘Oh Gods. . . ’ muttered Vim. ‘Pchaprotz!’ He snapped to the gunner beyond the late spy. ‘Open fire. Take the bastards out.’

‘Um, sarge,’ said Gunner Pchaprotz. ‘I can’t do it either – because I am in fact Makar the Scout, of the Big Victorious Dakhaari Warrior-Caste and I –’

‘Restrain that man!’ Vim shouted to the trooper beyond Pchaprotz.

‘Do it y’self!’ this trooper growled in Dakhaari, swinging his impact-rifle towards the sergeant. ‘Me Big Victorious Warrior Caste, too!’

With a roar, Vim flung himself over the late Saloi spy and pinioned the ex-Pchaprotz, struggling, to the ground. The trooper to the other side of the other Dakhaari grabbed for him and a scuffle broke out.

It was at that point, in the middle distance and off to either side, that two patches of vegetation stirred, and two figures stood cautiously up. Each wore mechanetic body armour remarkably similar to Vim's own, save in the small and incidental details that identified them as Dakhaari and Saloi, and each held up a ragged scrap of black cloth that was the traditional sign of a temporary truce.

Hampered a little by the struggling of the recently revealed Makar the Scout, Vim tried to study these two figures. They didn't seem to be carry-ing weapons. He came to a decision.

'Skana,' he snapped to the beefy female trooper. That marvellous pair of shoulders on her would come in useful. 'Take care of this. I must go and make parley with the Enemies.'

From her own position among the concealed Czhanos troops, Roz took sights on where the other forces were entrenched; first the one, then the other. This wasn't her fight, and despite the fact they were aliens she didn't have a real quarrel with any of them. She decided to shoot to miss.

Then again, though, given her justly famous expertise with a projectile weapon, if she deliberately aimed to miss, she was probably going to kill the lot of them. Decisions, decisions.

Sergeant Vim, bearing his own scrap of black cloth, was making his cautious way to a patch of ground equidistant from the three forces, where the other two armoured figures were waiting. He reached them and a brief conversation ensued. Roz turned up the sensors of her suit, but heard only an indecipherable but angry-seeming muttering.

Then the sergeant turned and walked back. He stood before his concealed troops and looked down at them. 'Right,' he said. 'Anyone who isn't really Glorious Czhanos Space Army, put up your hand.'

* * *

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It was almost a *jiik* before everybody was sorted out and the various under-cover spies had gone back to their own sides. Vim found that over half his squad had been suddenly replaced.

The Czhanos troops greeted their new-found comrades a little suspiciously –

they were all but strangers, after all – but this was tempered by the fact that, despite their identification markings, they were remarkably similar to themselves in almost every respect, even to their weapons systems. Form follows function, and a combat-active soldier was the epitome of functionality throughout the Three Empires.

There was a brief respite for the respective spies to report what they knew –

which was almost unnecessary since it was patently obvious that the Czhans, Dakhaari and Saloi were following precisely the same plan. There was a further pause, under the terms of the truce, as each side shifted position from the one it had given away.

And then the fighting started.

Chapter Twenty

The ship vented its retros and settled on the Kalas landing field – originally little more than a clearing cut from the fungus-jungle cover and now mostly overgrown. Jason heaved a small sigh of relief, equalized the pressure levels, discharged the electrostatics and shut down the engines. Coming down had been a nightmare of juggling the readings of a couple of ancient and malfunctioning automatic radio beacons.

He was feeling a little proud of himself. He had come in through the perimeter of Dakhaari space on silent running, the active optics and the clockworks turned off, avoiding the warships that patrolled the spatial edge and flying by naked eye. It had been an incredibly flashy piece of piloting, even though he said it himself.

Benny hadn't seen it, of course. She hadn't been there. Ever since Makrath she had made a point of never occupying the same cabin space as himself.

It was amazing how she did it. He knew she was aboard somewhere but he never, ever, saw her. He ran across Shug more often.

Now he went aft and rapped on the hatch leading to what had once been his sleeping quarters. 'We're here.' He wandered forward to the

airlock and after a while Benny appeared, wearing the torn and roughly repaired clothes she had stood up in when he had first met her.

'You should be able to find something going on from here,' Jason told her.

'Though the Hollow Gods know exactly where. Maybe you should take something to eat, some water maybe.'

'I shall be perfectly all right as I am,' said Benny coolly. 'Thank you very much.'

'Suit yourself.' Jason hit the airlock control and the hatch *whuffed* open.

'Hey, listen,' he said suddenly as she stepped through. 'Maybe we should at least *talk* about. . . '

He trailed off as she turned to regard him.

'About what?' she said. 'It didn't happen. It wasn't me. I don't do that. It was an aberration and it didn't happen.'

'Okay, fine,' said Jason.

'Fine,' said Benny.

'Well, take care then,' said Jason. 'Be lucky.'

'And you,' said Benny. 'You take care, too.'

* * *

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He took the ship up the moment she was out of the blast-radius. She hadn't expected anything else. The dangerous point had been when she left, when he could have simply taken hold of her and roughly shoved her against the bulkhead, pressing himself to her and cutting off her vain and pleading protests with a –

Benny crushed the thought and trudged across the landing mushroom-field towards the jungle, where several squat adobe huts denoted habitation of sorts. She was really going to have to stop thinking like this; overblowing and overanalysing every bloody mental and emotional twitch. It was like constantly worrying at an open sore.

Stop thinking about it. Let it go.

She had never, quite, felt that way before; the fever heat, the sense of bodies meshing so completely, of losing all sense of volition and identity. She had never lost it so completely, even in those sweaty, clumsy first-love fumblings with Simon years before, and certainly never with the depressingly few people since.

The things she had done, things that would ordinarily have taken careful and sober negotiation after a relationship lasting a number of months if not years, things that had to be finely judged, completely under control and were never quite got exactly right had become simply – miraculously – with this virtual stranger, everything she had ever wanted or dreamed. She had mauled and been mauled by some fabulous beast that was somehow both an extension of herself and something utterly other, leaving her feeling wrung out and evil and sated. There'd been a yawning hunger deep inside that she had never known existed till it was finally fed.

And that had terrified her. The deceptive ease of it; the collapse of barriers and shields so painstakingly built up over a lifetime as if they were nothing.

Nothing at all. And the knowledge deep inside her that, however good the repairs, however many new barriers she put up, she was going to touch him again and it would be magic time again – and the barriers would come crash-ing down and she would once again lose control.

And he would take it. Use it when it was on offer and when it wasn't simply piss off without a second thought. As he had just done: Without a thought.

Stop thinking about it for God's sake, Benny! Let it go.

And then, of course, there was the small fact that she had done these things with someone from a timeframe that had provided the definition for unsafe.

The lack of any overt symptoms of anything after more than fifteen years in a non-applicable-vector environment was a reassuring sign, she supposed –

but the first thing she was going to do when she got back to the TARDIS, if she ever did, was run some thoroughly extensive biomedical diagnostics on herself Quite what she was going to tell the Doctor she *really* didn't feel up to thinking about at this point.

The settlement here, apart from the fungal environment, reminded her a little of a Borneo village transplanted into the mechanical age; women and squalling children gathered around electrical radiant-heat cooking fires, males lounging against the walls of huts and comparing weaponry no doubt intended for hunting local fauna. Benny noted several projectile weapons among the spears and hunting blades. There was something slightly odd about them, something displaced, but she couldn't work out precisely what.

The people here seemed basically humanoid though slightly disproportion-ate, olive green with tiny vestigial ears; the common Dakhaari type, she gathered. This close to the edge of the independent sectors they were relatively cosmopolitan and relatively used to the idea of funny-looking aliens who were the wrong colour and shape. They snarled at her amiably as she went through them, merely displaying an inherent hot-blooded, short-tempered disposition rather than posing any real threat.

An automobile chugged its way through the settlement, weighed down with passengers, assorted livestock and luggage and reminiscent of the celebrated twentieth-century Third World charabanc – save that it was obviously handcrafted and cobbled together from local materials. Dakhaari was a cargo-cult culture, and had evolved over the millennia to the point where the copies of artifacts were fully functional in their own right.

Again Benny felt a sense of dislocation, a subtle transition in the way she was thinking – and at last she worked out why. Knowing without learning.

Little packets of contextual information were simply in her head. Somebody was running after the automobile and shouting how they needed a lift as far as Big Snake River and she understood every word – and, because secondary information is implicit in a language, she understood that Big Snake River was another settlement rather than the river itself She was getting closer to the TARDIS. Or the Doctor. Which wasn't necessarily the same thing.

It was going to make things a little simpler at any rate. She strolled over to one of the women, who was tending a pot full of something meaty with mushrooms.

'Excuse me?' she said, trying not to look at what was in the pot. The

worst thing was that while she now knew exactly what was likely to be in it, it still smelt incredibly appetizing. ‘Do the ships still come here?’ she asked. ‘When does the next one come?’

The woman looked up at her and grinned. Her teeth had been flied into complex but serrated and very sharp shapes. ‘Glorious Dakhaari Space Army come and go all time,’ she said. ‘Not now, though. All gone to make big fight cut-you-up. Kill all Enemies and come home again with many food and meat, you betcha. Hey, you want fight, eh? Betcha I cut you up and gut and eat you first, eh.’

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‘Not particularly,’ Benny said. ‘Not if I can possibly help it.’

The woman made a little waggle with her elbow that Benny interpreted as the equivalent of a shrug, and turned back to her cooking. Benny wandered back towards the landing field to settle down for what promised to be a long wait – and a greasy fireball fell shrieking from the sky and impacted directly in front of her.

The concussion knocked her flat on her back. A blast of heat seared her exposed skin. She forced herself to breathe out explosively rather than breathe in fire.

She rolled and scrambled to her feet. Her ears felt pressure-mushy, tem-porarily deafened by the shockwave. Temporarily, she hoped. Through squint-ing, stinging, watering eyes she saw the twisted, burning wreckage of a ship.

Later, when she had time to pick her recollections to pieces, she decided that she had automatically assumed that this was Jason’s ship – some accident in the suborbital, some ineptly repaired makeshift item of equipment finally giving out – and that this final shock of his being suddenly dead, on top of all her conflicting emotions (and even though she never wanted to see him again), had triggered some minor form of nervous collapse. She would rather have been seen dead than be seen screaming anything, let alone his name.

And then something moved in the burning wreckage.

And two things came out.

They were big: twice the size of even the most strapping and heavily muscled human man. They were bipedal, each lurching on hydraulic limbs that in turn supported a torso seemingly a mass of churning

pistons and gears.

Slablike, simian arms of some matte and pitted metallic substance, one terminating in a complex manipulatory claw, the other in a cavernous tube that could only be a blaster of some kind.

Jabbering together in a ticking, clicking, mechanical language, their eyes pulsing, their hydraulics chunking, they began to advance.

Jason swung the ship into Kalas orbit and locked the controls. ‘Good riddance,’

he muttered to himself ‘You’re well out of it.’

He lay there strapped to the acceleration couch for a while, watching starlight through the canopy, congratulating himself on how he wasn’t thinking about her at all.

When he had woken up on Makrath his emotions had been mixed to say the least. At first there had been a warm kind of dumb and bouncy, puppylike, pure and total joy that just went: ‘Duh, that was *fun*, hurk-hurk; wanna do more of that *lots*!’

Unfortunately, as he had surfaced towards consciousness, and the more sophisticated levels of self-awareness had cut in, it had all instantly and catas-130

trophically fallen apart. The knowledge of how alone he had been, how alone he was – the knowledge he had successfully repressed for years because he had nothing to compare it to – had hit him like a stilt-walking freight truck on overdrive.

And with it came an absolute and chilling terror. This one brief flare of happiness was going to be snatched away from him because that was how the world worked. There would be no reprieve. There was nothing he could do.

He was going to be left, lost and alone, as he ever was.

Only now he would know it.

Transfixed by irrational fear, he had remained dumb, willing her with his eyes, pleading with her to help him. If she had said one word to him, smiled once, touched him once with friendship, the words would have fallen over themselves and he would, like as not, have fallen at her feet in something like divine worship.

If she had said one word.

But she had pulled on her clothes with a little repulsed shudder and had just walked out, leaving him sitting there, looking at the space where she had been, not feeling or caring anything much and noting in a detached sort of way how he seemed to be shaking.

She had known. She must have known. How could she not have known?

After a while – and still not feeling anything much – he had climbed off the bed and climbed into his own clothes, climbed the ramps to the boarding house's reception chamber and got his deposit back on the prepaid room and walked through the never-sleeping tunnels of the settlement to the port, where he had paid the mechanics and the wharfside levy and walked to the ship and climbed into it, noting that she was waiting for him there and following him in but really not caring much either way. The only reason she'd be there was that nobody else was shipping out.

Now he flipped the switch that would activate the artificial gravity. Something tugged at his stomach momentarily, but an approximation of a fundamental interaction of physical matter resolutely failed to come on. Typical.

Jason unstrapped himself and hauled himself aft, back into the cargo hold.

The complex nest-like structure built by Shug was all but repaired now.

Lights blinked inside it, apparently at random. Shug was curled up in it, snoring and whistling rapidly in apparent sleep.

Over the years Jason had fallen into the habit of making decisions with the aid of his nominal pet, in much the same way that another man would flip a coin or roll dice. It had started by simply noting when the little creature seemed nervous or insistent in a what's-that-Skippy? kind of way, and had by now developed into a sort of random yes/no-gate cascade system where he would work through a problem by interpreting Shug's reactions to questions.

It was easier than thinking, and you could always blame it when things went wrong.

Double-checking that he was still wearing gloves, Jason reached into the nest and prodded the little creature. Shug jolted awake, aimed a swipe at him with a set of claws and then regarded him balefully.

'Okay,' Jason considered. 'Where do we go from here?'

Benny ran through the Kalas fungus jungle, crunching mushrooms and toad-stools and morels underfoot. Behind her the automatonic monsters chittered and jabbered and cut blaster-swathes through the fungus. Benny prayed desperately to whatever local gods were watching that the things would eventually run out of whatever it was they were using for ammunition – but that was seeming increasingly unlikely. The automata had laid indiscriminate waste to the Kalas settlement as she had run through it, killing hundreds, without a second thought. They had more than enough, for their present needs.

Something reared up before her, slimy and fungoid and humanoid in appearance – and for a heart-stopping instant her mind sideslipped and she was back on Heaven, years before, coming face to face with someone infested by a detonating Hoothi spore. Then she knew (without learning) that it was a Walking Puffball, a semi-sentient mimicking organism native to the planet and harmless to humans.

But by then it was too late. She had already flung herself away from it in unthinking terror. Her feet skidded out from under her and for the second time that day she hit the ground hard.

Slithering in a mulch of decayed fungus, she tried to stand and slipped and fell flat on her face again.

And the automated things came inexorably onwards.

And then, for the second time that day, a ship barrelled out of the sky.

It vented its retros just before it hit, bucked briefly in the air and then ploughed through the area of jungle currently occupied by the automata, crushing them beneath its hull.

Benny lay gasping in glutinous fungoid filth as the airlock hissed open and a figure swung himself down. She looked up at him and, for a moment, felt nothing but a kind of pure and rainbow joy.

'You came back,' she rasped.

'Yeah, well, I forgot,' said Jason coolly. 'You never bloody *paid* me.'

Some short while later the ship took off again, leaving behind it a blast-crater and the crushed and blasted remains of two mechanical automata.

Some further while later, in the head of one of them, still surviving, attached to an upper torso and arm, the mechanical brain *clicked*.

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This brain was based upon self-winding clockwork – bur clockwork refined to the point where it was as powerful and sophisticated as a twenty-second-century AI supercomputer. It did not achieve true sentience, but it was able to mimic sentience remarkably accurately in the pursuance of certain basic command-objectives.

These command-objectives could be expressed as: OBEY [CONTROL]. HUNT AND CANCEL [TARGET]. ENSURE VIABLE

SURVIVAL OF [PRIME CONTROL]. DESTROY ALL OBSTRUCTIONS.

Now, however, the clockwork automaton brain was damaged, disrupted by the shock of having several thousand tonnes of metal landing on it and then blasting it with several million kilojoules of explosively burning propellant.

The command-objectives now read:

+ + HUNT + + ENSURE + + [PRIME

CONTROL] + + + DESTROY + + +.

With its surviving arm it dragged itself towards the other remains.

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Chapter Twenty-One

In the Czhanos quadrant of the Summit, Supreme Commander Koth was sitting and pondering a particularly tricky problem laid out on a three-dimensional *tzuki* board, when there was a knock upon the door of his apartments.

‘One of our agents from the Dakhaari sir,’ said the voice of a guard from without. ‘Calls himself the Purple Hand.’

Koth moved a Lowest Common Denominator a couple of vertical levels and a heptagon obliquely, giving it access to every strategic

territory and transforming it into the Highest Common Factor. ‘Send him in.’

The door opened a crack and the intelligence agent slipped in. Now, in the quarters of his own people, he wore the traditional black cloak and fedora-like hat of his rank, one hand raised to conceal his face with a sleeve. It was, in fact, strongly reminiscent of the common garb of a Saloi – Just as, Koth gathered, the policing section of Saloi Removal Men wore a uniform remarkably similar to the Czhanos’ homeworld Internal Militia Force. All that could be made out of the spy under his clothing was that he was relatively small.’

‘The Purple Hand.’ Koth mused, looking at him. ‘You have something to tell me of the Dakhaari plans?’

‘No.’ The spy pulled off his hat and dropped his arm to reveal the face of Ravla,

‘I’d advise you not to call your guards,’ she said, calmly, in perfect Czhan. ‘I mean you no harm – not directly, here and now, at the least. Forgive me for adopting this subterfuge, but I had to see you in private.’

Koth, whose secondary senses had readied him for something of this nature (for one or two reasons), never lost his poise.

‘I’d like to know how you detected and assumed the guise of one of my most trusted agents,’ he said.

‘I just found the sneakiest-looking minion I could find, who marched around like he had a pig-iron rod up his backside,’ said Ravla. ‘Then I threatened to kill him unless he told me all.’

Koth looked at her. ‘Death holds no fear for a Czhan. Besides, I’d have thought with what we’ve all been learning lately, about what you people sometimes mean by *death*, he’d have jumped at the chance. It would be worth the 135

risk at any rate.’

‘After hideous, prolonged and extremely humiliating torture,’ said Ravla.

She scowled. ‘I found two Saloi spies masquerading as Czhanos spies before I found the right one. They jumped at the chance, but I disappointed them and let them go. I can give you their names if you

like.'

'I wouldn't bother,' said Koth. 'I'm sure we have them on file somewhere.

I sometimes wonder if you, me or Mor– if you, me and that new so-called Emperor of theirs are the only people really on our own sides.' He gestured to one of the comfy leather armchairs that were traditional for any Czhanos military man of rank. 'And I sometimes have doubts about me. So to what do I owe this visit?'

'Thank you.' Ravla sat down, crossed her legs and casually hitched the skirt of her robe up to show a shapely ankle.

Koth suddenly found himself trying not to stare at it. He had seen her before, in her ceremonial garb of a couple of rags and some strings of crude jewellery – but this was in a different context. You couldn't expect more of a heathen savage among her own, but Czhanos notions of propriety (or 'civilized behaviour', as they called it) would have put a Victorian drawing room to shame. . . and now Koth was alone, in his private apartments, with a woman who was brazenly flashing her ankles. It was the general equivalent, in human terms, of exposing one's lactile glands on the street – about which, as it happened, the Czhans had no taboos at all.

'I came here to talk about Sareth,' she said, kicking her foot idly back and forth. 'I've been to see him.'

She held up a hand to halt Koth as he began to bluster suspiciously. 'I admit that I had some form of alliance in mind – but then I talked to him. I think he's gone mad with power. He's dangerous to us all.'

Koth got the distinct impression that the Dakhaar Queen didn't mean a word of it. If he didn't know better he could have sworn that there was a barely suppressed and hurt quality to her voice, as though she had in some way been humiliated and slighted.

'And so,' he said, 'you've decided to offer your "alliance" to me instead? And what could you possibly offer me in return?'

Ravla reached out with a toe and brushed it against his knee in a way that sent shivers up him. 'I can think of something. I can think of several things.'

It was at that point that there came another knocking from without. Koth hurriedly rearranged his kilt. 'What is it?'

‘I have a message delivered by one of the automata-things, Supreme Commander,’ said the voice of the guard. ‘The Doctor is asking – should you run across Queen Ravla – that you and she join him immediately in the ballroom.

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An incidentally sequential perceptive phenomenon of the third law of thermo-dynamics is of the essence, he says, whatever that means.’

For all its splendour the ballroom in the centre of the Summit had been used thus far as little more than an interconnective concourse: a space through which one travelled from one quadrant to another. The blue cabinet of the Doctor had stood in the centre, its doors shut, and apart from a collective nagging suspicion that this was where the Time Lord spent his time when not visible it had remained, to all intents and purposes, silent and dormant.

Nobody had ever seen him go in. Nobody ever saw him come out.

After the attack upon Ravla, Koth and Morweth, the Doctor had commanded that the bagged remains of the assailants be placed outside it, where they had remained for a little while before vanishing. Again, nobody had seen anybody take them away.

Koth and Ravla arrived to find Sareth, alone, lounging by the cabinet.

‘You got the message too?’ he said.

Koth took the opportunity to look the newly revealed Emperor over. Ravla’s comments notwithstanding, the young Saloi didn’t seem mad with power. He seemed at ease, almost at one with himself, with a kind of effortless and unthinking charisma that comes from being, if not among friends, at least among equals. Koth was reminded of how his father, when not forced into the roles and postures required by Duty, would loaf about the estates in an old oilskin jacket and chat amiably and easily with anybody, of whatever rank –

always excepting the slave caste of course. Koth tried to do this when the occasion presented itself, but had never quite got the hang of it.

Ravla, he noticed, was regarding Sareth with a kind of icy spite.

‘I hope you haven’t been *overtiring* yourself since we last spoke,’ she said coldly.

‘Oh, don’t be concerned on my account.’ Sareth grinned. ‘I haven’t even started on the Dakhaari spies yet. You’ll hear about it when I do, I’m sure.

Just before I really start getting into the farmyard animals. As it were.’

‘You’re disgusting!’ Ravla exploded. ‘Many and various have been the tales of the dissipation and debauchery of the ancient Saloi Emperors – and I see by your example that they were all entirely true!’

‘I think, from what I hear,’ said Sareth, pointedly, ‘that you’re a fine one to talk.’

‘That’s an entirely different thing,’ said Ravla, defensively. ‘It’s cultural.’

‘Is that what you call it?’ said Sareth.

Koth had no idea of what they were talking about – but the sudden further plummet in temperature from the Dakhaar Queen decided him to change the 137

subject: ‘All we heard was that the Doctor wanted to see us,’ he said. ‘Do you know any more?’

‘Not a thing,’ Sareth said. ‘There was something about distilling a tincture from the fundamentally entropic nature of the space-time continuum, but I couldn’t understand any of that for the life of me. I think it just means that he has something to tell us.’

‘How right you are,’ said the Doctor, stepping all abustle from the cabinet.

Koth happened to be looking directly in that direction, but all he saw behind the door was darkness.

‘Sorry for the delay,’ the Doctor said. ‘I’ve been making a few long-overdue adjustments to the hynoleptic interface. Come in, come in.’ He gestured to the darkened doorway and grinned – and Koth suddenly caught a flash of an image in his head.

It was as though he were recollecting something he had never, ever seen, but for a brief instant he knew what it was, and that it was called a funnel-web spider.

‘Come into my parlour,’ said the Doctor. ‘I have something to show

you.'

There then followed, for all three of them, a complete and utter blank in their memories for they knew not how long. Discussing it, a long time later, when a wide variety had settled, they would agree that it had occurred but they could remember absolutely nothing of it. It was as though something had been literally cut from their minds, their very beings – so precisely that not a single trace remained. They were reminded of the process by which maggots clean dead flesh from a wound far more thoroughly than any knife.

They would come to learn, however, that when one cuts something out the shape remains. For the rest of their lives all three would sometimes wake up screaming from dreams of something sinuous and churning that didn't exist, and didn't exist on the edge of everything.

As it was, they stepped through the door of the cabinet and went blank –

and then they simply found themselves standing fifteen-odd paces into a largish octagonal room with roundels on the walls and feeling remarkably rested.

Their lungs and throats felt raw and their faces and upper necks were marked with nail scratches and bruises, as though they had recently clawed at them in some kind of frenzy, but at the time they didn't notice or think about it at all.

The Doctor was standing by a kind of plinth in the centre of the room.

A cover plate was off and he was tinkering with what they recognized as mechanetics but with a slightly strange quality. They were mechanetics as imagined by a child who is still of an age at which he believes that mechanetics can work miracles.

'That should sort it out,' the Doctor said. 'She'd forgotten how to treat visitors. I had to teach her about progressive evolutionary encephalization from scratch and there were still a few little wrinkles, as it were, to iron out.

Sorry.'

'What?' Koth's voice was a rasp.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said the Doctor. ‘I really wouldn’t worry about it. So don’t worry about it.’

Sareth was looking about himself with interest – and Koth wondered where the Saloi had picked up that black eye. He hadn’t had it before. Then he lost interest. Probably nothing important.

‘We’re still inside it, aren’t we?’ Sareth said to the Doctor. ‘We’re in your blue box.’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ said the Doctor.

‘I seem to remember old stories about that,’ Ravla said. ‘Stories of the Time Lords. The Hollow Gods built you magic doors that could take you wherever you liked.’

‘Well, I’m afraid that isn’t quite true,’ the Doctor said. ‘For two reasons – so far as going anywhere I like is concerned, for one. The electrogravitational field that’s currently enclosing this place is relatively weak, and ordinarily the old girl would be able to break through it by sheer brute force alone – but it’s also remarkably complex. It’s got her trapped like a Chinese finger-trap and she can’t get free. Believe me, we’ve tried.’

‘She?’ said Ravla.

‘What’s a Chinese finger-trap?’ said Koth.

‘The TARDIS.’ The Time Lord gestured about him proudly. ‘She’s basically a quasi-sentient interdimensional matrix-server but I prefer to think in terms of the vehicular because it’s slightly less sad. She’s a vehicle. She’s a conveyance.’

He stuck a hand in the pocket of his coat, pulled out something and handed it to Koth. ‘And that’s a Chinese finger-trap.’

Koth turned it over in his hands. It seemed to be a little tube made from interwoven strips of tissue-paper.

‘Besides,’ the Doctor said. ‘I couldn’t leave even if it were possible. I still have to find my travelling companions and –’ He frowned. ‘Do you know, that’s the first time I’ve even thought of them for a while. I hope that means they’ve been doing perfectly all right without me. Probably rather better, if truth were told. Ah, well.’

‘You said there were two reasons,’ Ravla said, absently watching Koth

as he fiddled with the item the Doctor had given him.

‘And so there are.’ The Doctor swept them all with suddenly fierce little eyes. ‘The second reason is the more important – and it concerns you far more directly. These Hollow Gods of yours never built the Time Lords anything. I’m 139

sure we would have noticed. To be perfectly frank, I think your Hollow Gods are complete frauds and it’s time they were taken down a peg or two.’

Instinctively, Ravla, Koth and Sareth glanced up at the ceiling. There was nothing there. It wasn’t as if it were black, or grey, but that it seemed to short out their optic nerves on some basic level so that they relayed absolutely nothing to their brains.

‘I shouldn’t worry about that,’ the Doctor said. ‘In here you’re perfectly safe from your Gods, such as They are. But that’s a large part of what I mean.

I think you’ve begun to realize something of their nature, but you still don’t realize it truly, in the core of your beings. You still make the automatic supplications, you walk through this place as though its walls were sacrosanct.

You’re *still* going through the motions that the Hollow Gods ordained – because it hasn’t occurred to you to do anything else.

‘You’re still, in your various ways, thinking in terms of antagonism and ultimate conquest; following the paths laid down for you probably long before you were born – and that’s going to have to stop. The Emperor Ai cut the imperial robe to avoid waking his beloved, and you’re all of you going to have to learn to do the same and cut your own sleeves. Come with me.’

With that he darted for a doorway opposite the one through which they had entered, and which all three could have sworn hadn’t been there before. He paused at it and beckoned them as they hesitated. ‘Come along. Nothing’s going to eat you. Not as such.’

The three rulers looked at each other for a moment, then followed. They found themselves in a corridor so long that it dopplered off to a vanishing point. Doors lined the walls and the Doctor led them past them.

‘I’d advise against overinquisitiveness,’ he said as Sareth tried to peer,

while passing, through a door that had been left ajar. ‘You might find something truly horrible.’

‘Ah,’ said Sareth. ‘Hideous alien secrets of the Time Lords that such mere mortals as we dare not know of.’

‘I was actually referring to a teenager’s bedroom,’ the Doctor said. ‘The TARDIS has accumulated quite a number of them over the years.’ Suddenly he skidded to a halt, on his heels, beside a door. ‘Here we are.’

Through the door was a chilly, antiseptic and white-tiled room something like a morgue. Lining one wall were stacks of refrigerated storage cabinets and on their doors were yellowing sticky labels. The neatly printed notations on them, in a language that neither Koth nor Ravla nor Sareth could understand, included PILTDOWN MAN, ANASTASIA ROMANOV, AMBROSE BIERCE and TYPHOID MARY. Items floating in fluid-filled jars on shelves included JOHN

THE SON OF ZACHARIAH (KNUCKLE), VILE JELLIES and HITLER’S BRAIN.

Surrounded by modular scanning and robotic surgical equipment were four 140

mortician’s slabs. On one was the body of Morweth and on the others were the slightly less intact remains of the Saloi, Czhanos and Dakhaari assassins he had killed. The remains had been laid out like gory three-dimensional jigsaw-puzzles to approximate their former humanoid shapes.

Ravla glared at the Dakhaar with a snarl. ‘I want him back. I’ll have his body hung and minced before his tribe – before the whole Dakhaar nation to show them the fate of the traitor.’

‘Feel perfectly free,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ve all but finished with him now.’

Sareth was glancing thoughtfully between the Saloi assassin and Morweth.

‘Now the custom,’ he said, indicating the assassin, ‘would be to burn him with all due ceremony and make much of him for being the epitome of that to which a Saloi should aspire, while Morweth would simply go into the lime pits. I think I’m going to make some changes there.’

‘I’m sure that would please him immensely,’ said the Doctor uninterestedly.

‘Though as much as I enjoy chatting about postmortuary arrangements, what I really –’

‘Doctor?’ said Koth.

‘Yes, all right,’ said the Doctor impatiently. ‘You can have yours back as well.

Now –’

‘I wasn’t going to say that,’ said Koth. ‘I just wanted to know how to get this damn *Kzhinize* trap thing off.’ He held up his inextricably linked fingers.

‘One of these days,’ said the Time Lord darkly, ‘I’m going to go back and tell the Word in the beginning to keep its mouth shut.’ He sighed. ‘There’s a knack to it. Observe.’ He rifled through a tray of assorted, gleaming surgical tools before finally selecting an old and tarnished jackknife, opened it up and simply sawed through the woven paper tube entrapping Koth’s fingers.

Koth looked at them for a moment. ‘I have no idea why, but I expected something a little more subtle.’

‘That’s because you’re confusing subtlety of thought with subtlety of execu-tion,’ said the Doctor. ‘I tried to demonstrate the concept to a king of Macedo-nia once, but he took away all the wrong lessons. Complete sociopath and a dipsomaniac to boot. He simply couldn’t see that what was appropriate for a golden cord tied in a sheep-shank might not be appropriate for flesh and –’

He slapped his head with the heel of his hand. ‘Now I’m doing it! We’re never going to get anything done at this rate.’ He strode over to the remains of the Czhan and pulled back a carefully cut section from the mostly detached head. ‘This is what I wanted you to see.’

Ravla, Koth and Sareth crowded round. Under the skull, clenched around the brain, was a spiderlike mechanism. Its limbs were sunk into the cerebel-lum and its ‘body’ was a mass of odd-looking components.

‘The cranial dome was detached at the sutures,’ the Doctor said. ‘Then it and the scalp were replaced with some remarkably proficient microsurgery.

There were no outward signs detectable on your levels of medical expertise.’

‘That thing in his head,’ Sareth said wonderingly. ‘It isn’t mechanetic. It looks like little crystals and wires. I know that the people outside in the Cluster sometimes use such crude things, but – ‘

‘I think you’ll find it comes from rather further than that,’ said the Doctor.

‘In several different directions.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Ravia.

‘I mean that this is in effect a remote-controlling device – and it’s a device that not a one of you is capable of constructing. I found one in each of these people, adapted for each specific nervous system but of the same basic design. Have anyone of you ever seen technology like this, based upon these principles?’

All three rulers shook their heads dumbly.

‘I thought not.’ Again the Doctor pinned them with his eyes. ‘You keep on thinking in terms of three factions. You never think of anything else. It’s almost impossible for you to think any other way. But there’s a fourth factor operating here – equal to, and separate from, and inimical to you all. I really think it’s time you started working together to deal with it, don’t you?’

Chapter Twenty-Two

In the border zones between the Empires, the *Nadir Star* returned to the main body of the Czhanos forces to find the Czhanos command ship in a furious three-way radio debate with its opposite Dakhaari and Saloi numbers. It seemed that each side had made a surreptitious attempt to reach the Summit and, like the *Nadir Star*, had found nothing. Captain an Salth’s report, which was picked up by everybody, broke apart a nascent *detente* between the Saloi and the Dakhaari against the Czhans and put everybody back to square one – save that the breaking point, the point where all three space armies would

launch themselves into battle, had been brought another step closer.

News of the disappearance of all three rulers spread through the Dakhaar and Czhanos worlds like wildfire – as, on the Saloi worlds, did the official announcement that Assistant sub-Administratorial Secretary Without Portfolio for the Pursuance of Imperial and Local Sewerage Regulation and Common Hygiene Morweth was alive and well and plainly visible at all times, which amounted to effectively the same thing. Everybody knew their leaders were missing, and the 'presumed dead' codicil could not be long in coming.

On Moriel, Roz Forrester sat in a nauseatingly twee little spinney and kept one eye on the readouts of her proximity detectors, watching for anyone or anything that might pose an active threat. From the middle distance came the sounds of explosions and gunfire and screams. In one hand she prudently hefted her impact-rifle at the ready, and with the other she was rolling a dispirited roll-up. The fact that certain psychotropic substances were as readily available here in the Empires, and had about the same general cultural weight as had tobacco on twentieth-century Earth, had been the only bright thing about her enforced extended visit.

Of course, the fact that it was more like the availability of psycho tropics to the US troops in the twentieth-century Vietnam 'police action' was something she'd rather not think about.

The proximity detectors rattled and flashed their alarms just as she had lowered her faceplate and was lighting up. Roz spat out the spliff, slapped the plate down and brought her gun around, then lowered it as she instinctively recognized Chris Cwej from his bulk and movements.

Chris automatically scanned the surroundings to make sure that Roz's presence was not some ruse by actively hostile forces, then put his own gun up 143

and trudged over to her. He sat down heavily, his body crushing a clump of little wild flowers.

'I hid up in a little glade with a fairy ring but I got overrun,' he said. 'I had to run for my life. There was no chance of getting anyone to sit down and sort things out peacefully, so I thought I'd just sit it out.'

'Same here,' said Roz, retrieving her roll-up and glossing over the fact that trying to get people to sort things out had never so much as occurred to her.

‘Nothing to do with me, nothing to do with us. No hair off my snout.’ She scowled. ‘I’m starting to *think* in bloody Czhan, now. Let ’em get on with it.

It’s what they’re here for.’

She regarded the joint for a moment, then put it away in an ammo case on her belt for later. There were quite enough pretty and glittery colours around at the moment without the aid of MDMA-coated THC leaves, she decided.

The concussion from a nearby explosion rustled the leaves on the trees and sent four-winged birds flapping and tweeting into the sky. Both Adjudicators reacted, and waited, but the next explosion was markedly further away. The epic centre of the battle seemed to be moving away from them.

‘Y’know, I think you might be righter than, you meant,’ Chris said thoughtfully after a while. ‘About that being what they’re here for. I mean one lot of people primed to invade a planet as part of a war doesn’t really mean anything. Anybody could do it and has done – but all three lots? From all three sides at exactly the same time? Doing exactly the same thing and perfectly matched down to the weapons systems? That smells like manipulation to me.

Somebody’s been setting these people up.’

‘The ships out in the space-war zones are perfectly matched too, from what I’ve heard,’ said Roz. ‘If it’s a set-up it would have to be of massive proportions and operating on every level at once. I mean, it must have taken thousands of years of insanely complicated planning to get these people to this point, and who would have the. . . ’ She trailed off. ‘Are you pondering what I’m pondering?’

‘No,’ said Chris. ‘He wouldn’t. Would he?’

Roz thought about it. ‘Nah,’ she said at last. ‘Probably not.’

‘What, not his style you ‘mean?’ said Chris. ‘You mean he’s too fundamentally decent to allow such needless loss of life in pursuance of some unknow-able end?’

‘Nah,’ said Roz. ‘I mean it’s been thousands of years and the whole thing hasn’t even fallen apart spectacularly *once*.’

Chris nodded slowly inside his helmet. ‘There is that. So it’s someone

else, then. I wonder who.'

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Sergeant Vim crawled through burning grassland, the flames searing but doing little real damage to his mechanetically hydrocooled body armour; he had set the grass on fire with a pilot-ignited flamer attachment to cover his progress. Around him he caught indistinct and moving shapes, heard the sounds of combat, but they had blurred together into indistinguishability.

The battle had almost instantly devolved into chaos. The fact that all three factions had similar equipment meant that the transceiver-based identification systems were useless. Each could be picked up by the two other sides, and to use them would be the equivalent of jumping up and down and shouting over a megaphone. You had to rely upon visual identification.

Unfortunately, what with the recent reshuffling of forces, anything you visually identified as, say, a Saloi might really be a Saloi or a Czhan or a Dakhaar, or any combination of the three if he were a double agent.

Not unnaturally, this had resulted in encounters operating upon the extreme ends of the combat scale – either of extreme paranoid caution, when everybody stayed stock still and waited for the other people to go away, or extreme paranoid mania, when everybody simply blasted anything and everything that moved. It was in one of the latter that Sergeant Vim had lost contact with the vestiges of his squad that had remained a coherent unit and got himself turned around.

Now he was trying to rejoin them, trying to make sense of his passive motion-sensor readings, trying to identify single and sporadic clumps of moving pinboard blips as the distinctive motions of trained Czhanos troops, which was proving extremely difficult.

Now the pitch of the battle seemed to be altering, its intensity lessening.

Vim glanced at his readouts again, and saw that several of the blips had stopped moving. This was nothing remarkable in itself, one of the points about a battle being that people stop moving all the time and in large numbers. But from the groupings it was obvious that they hadn't

simply stopped through being killed. There were no other blips in their respective immediate vicinities that could have killed them.

‘What the Hells?’ muttered Sergeant Vim.

‘Is hot,’ said a squeaky little voice behind him. ‘Isn’t you hot, mister not-soldier concert-party man? Is very hot indeed.’

Vim hit the burning ground, slapping the ash with his forearms and rolling himself round with a snarl.

Standing there, beside a little trapdoor sunk in the scorched earth, was the small furry three-eyed creature in dungarees whom they had encountered earlier – and who had subsequently been forgotten upon their finding the.

Dakhaari and Saloi forces. It was fanning itself rapidly with a paw and mopping its brow with a little handkerchief in the other.

‘Hot,’ it said again.

Vim glared at it with some incredulity. ‘What are you doing here?’

Dimly, he was aware that the ground was trembling, and had been for a while. He had put it down to the concussion of grenade blasts, but now he realized that he hadn’t heard any grenades detonating for a while.

‘Oh, I’s only want to introduce you to all my friends,’ said the little creature.

‘I’s already told you about Happy Plob what is me, and Grumpy Plob and Humorous Plob. . . ’ The ground heaved, and something burst from it. Something big.

‘. . . but I’s forgot,’ said the little furry creature happily, ‘about my friends Big Huge Rabidly Psychotic Plob, Bone-Crunching Munchy Plob and Indiscriminate Brutal Killer Plob.’

Chapter Twenty-Three

The ship flew through the denominational globe of Dakhaari space, swinging round the long way to avoid the Dakhaar Homeworld,

heading obliquely for the border zones between the Empires and towards the Summit.

Now that she could understand the language, Benny spent most of her time listening to the boastful Dakhaari radio propaganda and the fainter signals spilling over from the Empire-external news services of the Cluster, hoping for hard information on their ultimate destination, some indication that the Doctor might be there and what he might be up to.

She had no real luck. The Dakhaari channels were simply jabbering about big fights and killing lots of Enemies, while the news services just reported that contact with the Summit had been lost. They were more concerned with what that might mean for the independent sectors of the Cluster than with anything that might be happening in it.

When Jason had shown up again on Kalas with a demand of payment, Benny's reaction had been an unconcerned 'Well, what else would you have come back for?' Only, she realized, it had been the sort of defensive unconcern when one is pretending so hard to be it that it leaves little room for anything else. Benny had a queasy and disorientating sense of strong emotions locked inside her somewhere – somewhere in the background of her essential self and looming ominous, like a distant but approaching thunderstorm – but they were so chaotic that she couldn't grasp the texture, let alone the shape.

They had even been more or less friendly with each other – with that careful, fragile and distant amiability that comes from people pussyfooting around each other, avoiding absolutely anything that might cause contention and all the while pretending that they're doing nothing of the kind.

Now, however, they were nearing the end of the journey. The plan was to head for the Dakhaari forces screaming their out-Cluster ID on every wave-band, and Jason was of the considered and reasoned opinion that they were going to sodding well die. Benny, on the other hand, was certain (without quite knowing how she knew) that she would be seeing the Doctor again soon – and certain things were going to have to be said before they got lost in the inevitable advent of horrible ghastly monsters villainous evil masterminds out to rule the known universe and people running pointlessly around in corridors.

She had to clear the air before she went.

'Look,' she said at last. 'You really made me angry and I didn't deal with it very well. I'm sorry for that, at least.'

'What?' Jason looked around from his control with mild surprise. 'How did I make you angry?'.

'The morning after. . . you know. You just sat there and looked right through me as though I wasn't there.' Benny scowled. 'A girl does not like being totally ignored after the best sex of her entire life and –'

' *What?* ' Jason exclaimed with some incredulity.

'Um.' Benny was suddenly feeling a little incredulous herself She had meant to say it lightly and ironically – but some traitorous impulse to her vocal cords had made her say it as if she meant every word.

And the appalling thing was, she suddenly realized, she probably did.

She backpedalled furiously. 'I mean, okay, not that I've ever had that much to compare it with, but –'

'You've got more to compare it to than me,' said Jason. 'I mean, since the age of fifteen I haven't even seen another human, man or woman; you probably just triggered some sort of pattern-recognition reflex. I don't know what it's supposed to be normally like. I mean, for all I know I might be gay or something and –'

'Something like that, you'd have suspicions by the age of fifteen,' said Benny, deflating slightly as she realized Jason was backpedalling every bit as hard as she. 'At the very least.'

'That's why I said it,' Jason said. 'Fifteen's way too young to sort out what you are sexually. It was for me, anyway – I was kinda what you might call the definition of a late starter, and after that I never got the chance.'

'You must have had some inkling,' Benny said, feeling a little smugly motherly and superior, possibly for the first time in her life so far as this particular area was concerned. 'I mean even if you never went the whole way with anyone. I mean you must have had little girlfriends. Or boyfriends, as it might have been.'

Jason thought about it. 'I suppose there was Kara before I ran away from home, such as it was. And after that there was Beth. Then Danny,

then Susan and Lisa. Lisa was something like forty-three – which I thought was really old – and she taught me quite a lot. And then there was Carla, then Sean and then the four months I spent living in Danielle, Mo and Susan's squat in Euston before they kicked me out. That was a different Susan. And then there was Kimberly and then Micqui and Justin, and then Peter and Carmel and then Louise, which was like this totally bad scene and got me on the mostly-celibacy kick which lasted the month or so until I was alien-abducted, which changed things quite a lot as you can probably imagine.

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'So, anyway, after that there was Rana, who was humanoid but more or less androgynous, and then I met Liva who wasn't humanoid but was what you might call *definitively* female; that was before Sali, of course, and after that there was Moiara and Kamo and Sai d'RaKosh and. . . '

Back in the cargo hold, Shug suddenly sat bolt upright, the reaction under zero gravity launching him from his nest to ricochet off a bulkhead with a thump.

Shug rubbed at his bruised head for a moment with a hiss of irritation, and then grabbed a handhold with a little, clawed and opposably-digited paw.

Strange, complex antenna-like growths sprouted from within his ears. He cocked his head to one side and, with a heave, set himself slowly revolving, listening for a sound that only he could hear.

And at last he heard it.

The ship was close now. Close enough.

Forward in the control cabin, Benny was getting slightly irate.

'How could I have been so stupid?' she snapped. 'God alone knows what I'm going to come down with. I'm probably now crawling with horrible incurable human and alien STDs!'

'I thought that was supposed to be incredibly unlikely,' said Jason.

'Not if you've been with someone who's screwed half the sentient beings in the known bloody universe,' said Benny darkly. 'Somebody who gives an entirely new meaning to the term species-jumping.'

‘Now you listen here,’ said Jason a little heatedly. ‘I’m thirty years old, near enough. How many thirty-year-olds do you know who haven’t had the odd relationship or two?’

‘“Odd” is a word that is entirely too appropriate,’ Benny said murderously.

‘It’s the “or two” I’m having problems with. Some of us, at least, have some small sense of decorum. Some of us can still remember how many *times* we’ve done it without having to take our shoes and socks off.’

‘Like who, for instance?’ said Jason.

‘Like me, for one,’ said Benny.

‘Yeah, well that’s just because you’re a tight-arsed, stuck-up bitch who thinks she pees rose water and the sun shines out of her fundament,’ said Jason.

‘ *What*?’ said Benny.

‘You heard,’ said Jason.

‘ *Silence*!’ cried a new and somewhat squeaky voice. Benny’s and Jason’s heads snapped round simultaneously to the hatch leading aft.

Floating there, glaring with triocular fury and clutching a huge blaster gun that seemed bigger than it was in his paws, was Shug.

‘You will obey my every command!’ it squeaked. There was a moment of stunned silence.

‘Here we go again,’ said Benny dispiritedly. ‘Do you know, if I had a credit for every time somebody’s –’

‘Shug?’ said Jason in astonishment. ‘You can speak?’

‘Give the walking anthropoid a monkey nut,’ the little creature snapped.

‘Have you any idea how hard it’s been having to listen to your asinine grunting all these years and never being able to tell you to shut your stupid face? Have you? I thought I must simply have had the bad luck to pick the most brain-dead and idiotic human moron on the entire

Earth-planet.' It turned its head to glower at Benny balefully. 'I was wrong.

'Now, *you*' – it prodded the gun in the direction of Jason – 'have an absolute and unthinking terror of any sustainable relationship because of your bad experience with one as a child. You equate love with violence and brutality, you think it would turn you into a violent, brutal monster and this has led you into a seemingly interminable series of loveless and purely physical encounters where there can be no possibility of real involvement whatsoever.'

It turned its attention back to Benny. 'And you have the most classic case of a displaced Electra complex I've ever seen. Daddy went away and so assumed godlike, perfect proportions and you've been looking for him ever since. No man can ever measure up to Daddy, so you compulsively sabotage your relationship with every partner you ever had and manoeuvre them into betraying you – all unaware that you're simply re-enacting the deeper betrayal of Daddy leaving you in the first place!'

Shug twitched its huge blaster-gun in an irritated gesture that took in the pair of them.

'And now you've both met someone utterly compatible on the physical, hormonal and deep subconscious levels and you're abreacting. To put it into words that even idiots like you can understand, you're both in love, you don't know it – and you're both such utter screw-ups that your respective reflex mechanisms are going into catastrophic overload in trying to sabotage it.'

Benny stared blankly at the angry little alien creature. 'Why are you –' Her throat was suddenly dry and her vocal cords failed her. She tried again. 'Why are you telling us this. . . ?'

'So you can shut up about it!' the angry little alien creature shrieked. 'It's been going on for days now! On and on and *on* for days! If I hear one more sexual-chemistry-charged and mutually misunderstood argument I'm going to shoot the pair of you!'

Shug calmed down slightly, though it obviously took an effort. 'And I have to keep you alive,' it said in slightly more reasonable tones.

'Well, that's a relief, at any rate,' said Jason.

‘For the moment.’

‘Oh,’ said Benny.

‘One of you, at least.’ Shug scrabbled with its backpaws in the air, working its way slowly off to one side of the hatch. It jerked the gun. ‘Out. Keep your hands where I can see them. Not that a pair of idiots like you are capable of thinking of anything to do with them.’

Benny and Jason hauled themselves through the hatch, and with Shug scrabbling after them made their way with not a little trepidation back towards the cargo hold.

‘Oh my. . . ’ Benny breathed when she saw what was in it.

The cable-tendrils of Shug’s scavenged nest twisted at impossible angles and blazed with a light like burning magnesium.

Its shape tore at her mind. The only times she had ever seen anything remotely like it was when gazing at the swirling patterns of light in the central control column of the TARDIS.

‘Now,’ said Shug, depressing a big red button on a battered control panel with a paw. ‘Now we go home.’

And the entire ship vanished.

Ten seconds later, an empty bit of space nearby spluttered and flared with energy and the ship appeared again.

‘Damn!’ In the hold Shug glared at Jason. ‘I had this set up perfectly until you decided to wreck it by blowing the cargo doors without so much as a by-your-leave.’ It spat contemptuously. ‘What is it about you humans that manages to throw an incompetent and ham-fisted monkey-wrench into absolutely everything?’

‘Hey,’ said Jason. ‘I’m sorry, okay? It’s not as if we knew or anything.’

Muttering horrible curses under its breath, the little creature hammered on a twisted wire projection. The nest blazed with light again, and the ship vanished again.

Chapter Twenty-Four

In the border zones the three Fleets broke off even minimal radio

contact with each other and strategically redeployed, preparing themselves for the kamikaze manoeuvres that would launch them into war. Throughout the Empires entire planets were set to blow. Around Moriel, ships hung in space, waiting for the signals from their groundside troops to say that landing areas were secured and growing more impatient by the *jiik*.

In the Summit, weapons had been broken out. Each delegation had brought along a large supply of them on the off-chance that they would be needed.

Now armed groups scoured the corridors and chambers, looking for some sign, some clue that might indicate this other factor that was seemingly pitted against them all.

These armed groups consisted of an increasingly homogeneous mix of Dakhaari, Czhans and Saloi. They were all in this together; the years of spying and infiltration had mixed them up to a large extent anyway and, since old habits tended to die hard, everybody wanted to keep everybody else precisely where they could see them.

'There's nothing,' said Koth. He was in one of the smaller rooms of the public quadrant, drinking cups of Dakhaari klohah and discussing their progress with Sareth, Ravla and the Doctor. 'It would help if we knew what we were supposed to be looking for, but even so there's nothing that we didn't bring ourselves.'

One of the incidental effects of this new homogeneity was that the Elevated Tongue was now being used constantly, and under constant use its strictly formal constructions were breaking down. The diplomatic language was assuming a new fluidity and – although those gathered here didn't know it – it was becoming remarkably similar to the Basic as used by the Cluster outside, from which it had originally derived.

'I think,' said the Doctor, 'that perhaps you're thinking on the wrong levels.'

'Well I'm afraid we mere mortals don't have the lofty omniscience of some people,' said Ravla pointedly. 'Mentioning no names. Our thoughts aren't *elevated* enough. I get the impression you know exactly what we should be doing, so why don't you just tell us?' It had been a long standard day and she was feeling a little peevish.

‘I’m afraid that really isn’t my style.’ The Doctor frowned as though recollecting something painful. ‘I went down that road a little in what you might call an immediately previous life. Grabbing people by the hand and *forcing* them to press the buttons. That way lies just the sort of thing your Hollow Gods have done to you, and I decided to stop it. I’m incapable of doing it now.

As an acquaintance of mine said just before he died: I can lead you to the doors of truth, but I can’t make you *aaargh*.’

The Time Lord continued, oblivious of the fact that Koth had groaned, Sareth had put a hand over his eyes and Ravla had screwed her own eyes shut and stuck her fingers in her ears: ‘Perhaps levels were the wrong terms to speak of, because the things I’m trying to make you realize are so basic that you’ll kick yourself when you know. It isn’t a question of higher and lower or better and worse, it’s a question of *other*. You need to think in other directions.’

‘Well I wish you’d make the markings a little clearer,’ said Koth. ‘We’ve been over and over it again, with nothing to show for it but further complication.’

‘Then why not go back to the basics?’ said the Doctor. ‘What do you basically know? What can you infer with an absolute certainty?’

‘We were attacked.’ Sareth counted on his fingers. ‘We were attacked by our own people who had been implanted with control mechanisms. That means there was a point when the mechanisms were implanted, a place where they were implanted and someone or something who did it.’

‘As I said,’ said Koth. ‘We’ve found nowhere or nothing that could conceivably be capable of doing it. We’ve traced the attackers to the point where they disappeared, we’ve ransacked our furnishings and movables and questioned each and every one of our people, let alone other people’s spies masquerading as our people. We’ve investigated everything that moves here and everything that doesn’t.’

‘Everything?’ said the Doctor. ‘Absolutely everything?’ Sareth caught the note in his voice. Koth had asked for directions, and the Time Lord was doing everything short of drawing a luminous chart and waving it in front of their faces. The key themes here seemed to be ‘basic’ and ‘other’. Work it out logically, basic step by step.

Everything the Saloi, Dakhaari and Czhans had brought here had been searched. Everything that moved had been investigated. So what other

things were here? What other things moved. . . ?

When the answer hit him it was so simple and obvious that his first reaction was an utter and piercing shame at not having thought of it before. And if Ravla slapping her forehead with the heel of her hand and Koth shouting ‘Oh Gods how could I have been so stupid!’ was any indication, the others had simultaneously arrived at the same conclusion, too.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Roz Forrester and Christopher Cwej prowled their way cautiously across the battleground, sensors alert for anything still alive and hostile.

Still-

smouldering swathes had De en burnt through what had once been grassland; the scorched black skeletons of trees shed clinker-red-edged flakes of bark ash to jitter and drift in the breeze.

The ground was pocked with H-E detonation craters, scattered with spent shell casings and power packs and shrapnel. Bodies lay strewn and twisted, taken out by close-range fire that had opened up their suits, roasted inside them by flamers, caught by a single round of a rapid-fire discharge that had found a weak spot in their armour.

Flocks of four-winged birds soared overhead, in the fluffy sky, occasionally stooping and perching to gobble up some soft member a soldier didn’t feel the need for any longer, some eyeball or some exposed length of gut. The worst thing about it was the smell; the odour of fresh and chargrilled meat that had your stomach growling and your mouth salivating, before your mind belatedly cut in and told you what it was.

But that, Roz thought, wasn’t the worst thing. She had seen battlefields before, from the 1914 Somme to the 2697 Rigel Wastes, and when the sounds of fighting had ceased and they had left their untouched cover in the spinney she had sourly joked that the addition of a battlefield could only be an improvement on this place. She was now regretting it.

This was nothing more than pointless carnage. This was not some Normandy, with the ordinary, unexceptional and not particularly

noble Allies going up against true Evil and forcing it back into its bunker. This was not some barbarian horde sweeping into a Rome long gone soft and decadent. This was not even some Agincourt, with the one side having all the longbows and not afraid to use them. Right or wrong, for good or ill, those conflicts had at least *changed* something. There had been human reasons, some human purpose, some human point. This had none.

Three evenly matched factions had simply met and slaughtered each other.

Possibly it had served as entertainment for these Hollow Gods that they were always on about – but then again, Roz gathered, these so-called Gods actually and physically arrived in person, and there had been nobody or nothing like that evident.

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The worst thing, however, was the very setting she had joked about. This carnage in the midst of sickeningly dainty countryside, the juxtaposition of it, made it all the worse. It was as though a feature-length children's cartoon had been intercut with scenes from Nazi death camps – although that wasn't quite the image she was flashing on; that was far too congruous by half, as it should be, given the marked similarity between the progenitors of certain feature-length films and concentration camps. Roz found her mind shying away from the true image this reminded her of, and it was a while before she pinned it down and got it.

A small *subjective* while before, on a visit to early 1995 with the Doctor, Roz had found herself briefly caught up in the shelling of the lifeline tunnel into a town called Sarajevo. By one of those inexplicable discontinuities that happen in war, among the black-market couriers, traders and war correspondents there had been a little girl, of about five or six, wearing brand-new, highly polished and extremely expensive Western-made little shoes. Roz had had no idea how someone like that could have been there, and it was impossible to ask because the only evidence had been one of the shoes. The sight of it, lying against some ruptured concrete piping, the foot still inside it and the stump of the lower leg sticking out, seemed to sum up the battleground here: incongruous, tragic and absolutely pointless.

'Are you all right, Roz?' Chris called.

While Roslyn Forrester had been sitting around moping about the

futility of it all, Chris Cwej had been checking over the bodies for wounded. That was him all over, Roz thought: drop him in a field hospital and he'd be cheerfully scrubbing up and capably helping out without a pause for breath. This was probably related to the fact that, while Roz had no problem with hostility and violence on the whole, it tended to upset Cwej deeply. She was never going to give him the satisfaction of hearing her admit which attitude was the healthier.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I was light *giks* away.' She walked over to where Cwej was standing and surveying the battleground. 'I wish we really were. Light *giks*, I mean.'

'I've noticed something,' Chris said, with the kind of bright but detached interest commonly used to cover emotional overload.

'What have you noticed?' said Roz.

'What I've noticed,' said Chris, 'is that there aren't enough bodies.'

'Well there's quite enough for me,' said Roz. 'What were you thinking of doing? Making a rockery out of them?'

'What I mean,' said Chris in tones bordering on the impatient, 'is that there's people missing. Look.' He pointed down to what Roz had thought was simply the scattered remains of an exploded combat-suited body, and which she had 156

avoided looking at. Now, she saw it was merely the scattered remains of a combat suit.

'There are quite a few like that,' Chris said. 'Oh there's more than enough dead, but I found a lot of empty suits. Nobody alive, wounded or otherwise.'

'You mean someone's had them away?' said Roz.

'Or something.'

A clattering nearby caused them both to swing around, guns at the ready.

It seemed to have issued from several suits that obviously contained bodies, arranged in an untidy pile.

'Do you know?' said Roz thoughtfully. 'There seems to be something slightly odd about one of those dead bodies.'

‘What, you mean the fact that it’s trying to curl up clutching its hands to its head and shouting don’t take me away, don’t take me away?’ said Chris. ‘Yes, I thought that was rather odd, too.’

They crossed over to the pile and hauled off the genuinely dead bodies to reveal the terrified suited form of a Czhan.

‘Don’t touch me!’ he shouted. ‘Me Makar the Scout of Big Victorious Warrior-caste and I –’

‘Pchaprotz?’ Roz said as the figure desperately tried to kick himself away by his heels. ‘Pchaprotz, it’s me, Roz For. . . ah – Gunner Verkog. It’s Gunner Verkog, Pchaprotz!’

‘And Gunner Skana,’ said Chris Cwej.

Some of the frenzy went out of the soldier. He looked up at them eyes wide behind his helmet. ‘Verkog and Skana? Is it really you?’ Then his eyes hardened. ‘Then you are bastard Czhanos Space Army and I am Makar the Scout of the –’

Roz took his impact-rifle away from him before he got around to remembering he had it. She sighed.

‘I think,’ she said, ‘we’d better take it again with the introductions from the start.’

After a confusing quarter of a *jiik* things had been to a certain extent sorted out. Makar the Scout had been reassured by way of the mutual trust that had been established as comrades in the Glorious Czhanos Space Army, that none of them were in fact Glorious Czhanos Space Army – but he remained shaken.

It seemed that he had witnessed horrors with which his mind was unable to cope.

‘I was caught in a Saloi ambuscade,’ he said. ‘At least, I think it was the Saloi. It might have been Czhans or even *Dakhaari* in the confusion. I was clipped by a round and went down stunned, and the troopers I was with went down on top of me.

‘When I came round, I started to crawl out from under – and then I saw what was happening. There were a pair of the Enemy troops over there.’ He pointed to where the empty remains of suits lay on the

blasted earth. ‘There was one of those little things with them. Like that thing we met before. It seemed to be talking with them.’

Makar the Scout had taken his helmet off. His face was naturally pale, almost matching his grafted artificial Czhan tusks. He picked up his helmet and sucked a glucose drink from its built-in dispenser, trying to stop his shaking.

‘And then what?’ said Roz. ‘What happened then?’

‘This. . . thing came out of the ground. Very pale, many legs. Very big.’

Makar shuddered convulsively with the shock of remembrance, almost choking on his glucose drink. ‘It reached for the soldiers with a claw-thing, and all the time it was making this sound – snikka-snik. Snikka-snik. Snikka-snik.

Snikka. . . ’

‘It took them?’ said Chris, standing up and worriedly scanning the battleground.

‘I think so,’ said Makar miserably. ‘I didn’t see it. I hid and closed my eyes.’

He seemed puzzled rather than anything else. ‘I looked at it and it turned me into a coward.’

The Dakhaari/Czhanos trooper seemed so distraught that it moved even Roz to sympathy. She reached out a hand to put it companionably on his shoulder – and it was at that point that the entire world flickered and changed.

Instead of a precious if slightly blasted countryside filled with chirping and increasingly well-fed birds, they were on a crazy-paving-cracked and blood-red plain. In the distance, the grassy mound on which they had made out little doll’s-house dwellings was now a lumpen clot of black decaying matter, like a burial mound that had absorbed and intermingled with the corpses that it covered; clumps of jagged structures protruding from it like scattered, rotting teeth from gums. The previously fluffy sky was now a sickly green and it roiled, crackling with the discharge from a thrashing arc of energy light that might have once been a rainbow. Flocks of carrion-bats snarled as they gorged upon the bodies of the dead.

Something roared and juddered and thudded in the Morielian earth, some churning, bladed, black, iron death machine.

‘Oh, Goddess,’ Roz Forrester breathed.

And then the world changed back.

Everything was as it was before, except that it was in some way thinner; the trees and birds and fluffy clouds part of some tissue-thin mask laid over the horrors beyond. You could almost, but not quite, see the alien wasteland out of the corner of your eye.

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‘Did you see that?’ Chris said, slightly wild-eyed and shaking his head as if to clear it. Something in his voice said that he was hoping it was some kind of hallucination.

‘I saw it,’ Roz said. ‘I only wish I didn’t. What did you see, Pcha. . . Makar?’

She looked at the soldier to find that he had fainted dead away.

‘Y’know, sometimes I get the distinct impression this guy isn’t really cut out for this sort of thing,’ she said.

Sergeant Vim surfaced into consciousness. There was an ice-cold, numb feeling in his scalp and something was constricting his forehead. He tried to move his hands and feet and failed. More straps. He was strapped to something hard, in a sitting position, his head immobilized.

In front of him was a stained but otherwise smooth and blank stone wall, lit from behind him, casting his seated shadow. Vim rolled his eyes, trying to pick up something else with his periphery vision. Nothing.

Nothing except for the sounds that assaulted him on either side. The sound of screams and babbling and pleading, of electric saws cutting through what could only be flesh and bone. The rapid and multiple sounds of something punching repeatedly through meat.

Abruptly, another shadow appeared, and from the left appeared a form. It blurred and doubled as Vim tried to focus on it, and then snapped to clarity: a little three-eyed creature, strapped into a rolling mechanetic conveyance mat raised it to roughly Vim’s own full and

standing height.

‘Again,’ Vim rasped through desiccated vocal cords, his voice almost inaudi-ble even to himself over the other sounds. ‘“Happy Plob”.’

The creature looked down at him. ‘I think we can dispense with all that, now.’ Its squeaky voice somehow held the cool and contented gloating quality that a certain kind of mind reserves for those it has truly helpless. ‘I am not a

“Plob”. I am a Skrak. My name is Gleka.’

Suddenly the weight of memory landed on Vim: out on the battleground, the little creature, the thing bursting from the ground with its pale slick tentacles and mandibles and-

He tried to form a coherent picture of the thing and his mind flatly refused, shrieking and gibbering at him in terror. His eyes swung wildly, trying to locate the monster that he was sure, was *positive*, was creeping up behind him.

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ said Gleka the Skrak. ‘The Otherlings aren’t loose now.

They’re restrained, for the moment. Isn’t that a relief?’

‘You can do what you like to me,’ Vim spat. ‘I am a non-commissioned officer of the Glorious Czhanos Space Anny. You’ll never make me talk.’

Gleka the Skrak threw up its paws in mock dismay. ‘The very idea!’ It pointed a paw at Vim. He noticed now that the claws were very dirty and needle-sharp. ‘You’re not going to *tell* me anything. You’re going to *do* something. You’re going to call your comrades, in the ship you have orbiting the planet; you’re going to tell them that you have secured a landing site and you’re going to call them down.’

A kind of manic light – part triumph, part adoration – appeared in the little creature’s eyes. ‘Everything must be made ready,’ it squeaked. ‘Ready for our leader. He’s coming soon. Oh yes he is. . . ’

‘Never!’ Vim roared, lacerating his dry throat with pain. ‘I’ll never do the things you ask!’

Gleka the Skrak tut-tutted. ‘Yes you will.’

It snapped a paw, and a new shape appeared before Vim’s eyes. It was very close. It appeared to be a kind of mechanetic spider, its sharp-tipped limbs protruding from a clump of strange components and crystal.

‘It’s a simple process,’ the Skrak squeaked from beyond it. ‘We saw the top of your head off and stick one of these on your living brain.’

The sound of the saws, the screams, all came together then. The blood hammered in Vim’s ears. He dry-retched, strained vainly against his straps, tried through it all to steel himself against the coming pain.

‘Oh, don’t worry about that,’ Gleka the Skrak said lightly. ‘We’ve already cut your head open with our little –’

It stopped, glanced about itself. Suddenly, strange and weblike glowing growths burst from its ears and thrummed.

‘He comes,’ it said, the note of worshipful awe back in squeak, ‘The Mighty Leader comes at last. We heard him in our heads. I must go attend to the Mighty Leader of All Skrak.’

Beyond the spider-thing, Gleka the Skrak trundled off on its mechanetics.

The last thing Sergeant Vim heard it say, as if in afterthought, was: ‘Proceed with the operation.’

Outside the standing Zone of Illusion that had been maintained for the incursive Empire troops, the landscape of Moriel showed its true and baleful face. A hot wind swept over the black clot-mound, roared around the structures that ringed it, streamed through the thoroughfares of the citadel in its shadow – as streamed the Skrak themselves, those that did not have more pressing duties, pouring from their habitations towards the plains where they congregated and waited, squeaking and squabbling among themselves in their excitement.

A gargantuan thunderclap rocked them back on their paws, knocking over several who were mechanetically assisted. Their jabbering died down and for 160

a moment there was no sound save the wind, and the distant crackle of the energy stream scrawled across the sky.

And then, on the plain, a new and golden energy flared from nowhere.

It streamed in thrashing tendrils from a pinpoint that simply didn't exist in the three spatial dimensions, and the tendrils curled in on each other and interwove and bulged and billowed like a burning net. The static discharge of it made every hair on every Skrak stand on end.

And then the net exploded, its golden energies dissipating into a fading, tangible fog of diffused matter that was snatched away by the wind.

The twisted wreckage of an already battered and elderly space freighter hit the heatcracked plain with a crash.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

In the cargo bay Jason climbed groggily to his feet and hauled at a couple of packing crates that had tried to flatten Benny. Fortunately they were empty, but unfortunately they were metal and heavy on their own account.

He reached to help her as she gasped for winded breath. 'Are you okay?'

Benny ignored the outstretched hand and sat up. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

She knuckled at her bruised back and grimaced. 'Though I don't think I'm going to be dancing the fandango ever again. I certainly couldn't before.'

'Suit yourself then.' Jason zipped up his leather jacket to the chin and then stuffed his hands sullenly into the pockets. 'I only thought I'd try to help.'

'Keep your hands where I can seem them!' Shug, seemingly none the worse for wear, was squatting in the partially melted remains of his junkyard nest, still pointing the gun at them. Jason pulled his hands out of his pockets and waggled them.

'That's better.' Shug reared upright and catapulted himself out of the nest and onto the deck with a kangaroo-like kick of his hind legs. He jerked his head towards the cargo bay doors. 'Open them.'

‘Now wait a minute. . . ’ Jason said.

‘I think it’ll be all right,’ Benny told him. ‘I’ve felt this sort of thing before. I think we’ve. . . *travelled* somewhere. I think there’ll be an atmosphere we can breathe.’

‘ *I* can breathe it,’ Shug said. ‘I don’t care about you.’

‘Charming.’ Keeping his hands where Shug could see them, Jason walked over to the door controls and cut them in. There was a small electrical fire and a shower of sparks.

‘Typical!’ Shug muttered. He waved his gun for Benny to join Jason by the doors. ‘Open them by hand.’

Jason reached for the emergency catches, keeping his face away from her, but she got the impression that his entire focus of concentration was upon her.

‘Listen,’ he murmured. ‘The moment they’re open I’m going to make a break for it.’

Benny shot a stony glance at him. ‘Why does that not surprise me?’

‘I’m going to be very obvious about it. You use that to get yourself away. I’ll give you some time.’

‘Oh,’ Benny said quietly.

‘If I thought you were capable of it,’ Shug growled squeakily from behind them, ‘I’d think you were plotting. As it is, I’ll just shoot you to shut you up.

Open the doors.’

Jason turned his head to Benny and mouthed *get ready*. She thought about this, and had one or two ideas of her own, but for the moment nodded slowly.

Jason bloody Kane was going to get the surprise of his life. The gall of the bastard to imagine that he was going to risk his life to save *her*! The very idea! She’d show him.

The doors were buckled and jammed but eventually, with Jason hauling on one and Benny on the other, they gave. A hot and sandpapery wind blew into the cargo bay, scattering some of the lighter debris.

Jason and Benny looked out at the blood-red plain and the citadel beyond and the black mound beyond that and at the large crowd of ragged furry three-eyed creatures who were waiting for them.

‘Um,’ said Jason. ‘Maybe now might be a good time to rethink our basic strategy.’

Some ten minutes later Benny and Jason were marched through the citadel, Shug trundling behind them and aiming the blaster at their backs. Several creatures from the crowd they had come face to face with followed chattering behind.

When Shug had herded them out of the wreckage of me ship, a group of exo-enhanced creatures had broken from the crowd and excitedly attempted to confer with him in a chittering language that Benny had not been able to understand. This had frightened her a little. Wherever she was, she was out of translatory range of the TARDIS again. She was back to square one or worse.

Shug had scolded the creatures in the same tongue, and they had backed off humbly, bowing in their mechanetic cradles. Evidently Jason’s ex-pet was a being of no small importance here.

They had covered the two humans with heavy-duty rifles gripped in servo-claws while Shug slipped into his own support rig, then returned to Jason and mechanetically shoved him hard enough to knock him off his feet. ‘Time to go, monkey-boy.’ There was something of the schoolyard bully in his tone and language patterns, the aping of superior constructions without quite knowing true superiority. That gave Benny pause for thought. It set off the alarm bell realization that one may be in the power of an individual not quite in the saddle of his will. Could that possibly be used at some point?

Now, in the citadel, Benny cast an eye over the structures they were walking between. They seemed to have been accumulated rather than built: piles of rusting steel and synthetics and what looked like wood, little more than piles of junk.

‘I can’t say I think much of the architecture in these parts,’ she said to nobody in particular.

‘Silence!’ Shug squeaked, prodding her with the blaster.

‘You know, whatever you’re expecting to achieve by that, it isn’t working,’

Benny said. ‘Aliens threatening me with guns and shouting silence is my natural environment. It’s like coming home.’

‘If you say one more word I’m going to stick this gun in your mouth and blow your spinal column out of the back of your neck,’ said Shug, in the tones of one who is utterly at the end of his rope. ‘And I really mean it.’

Benny decided to keep quiet for a while.

They came to an area on the other side of the citadel, on the side nearest the mound, which rose from the landscape with a clear delineation, its surface smooth like a fresh blood blister. Off to one side was a hatch set into its surface. Before it, seemingly scattered across the ground at random, were sheets of rusting corrugated iron.

Shug used a servo-arm to shove Jason towards one of the sheets. ‘Open it.

Pull it back.’

Jason hauled back the sheet to reveal a hole.

Shug turned with a *whirr*, in the saddle of his mechanetic support, to face Benny. ‘In.’

‘What?’ said Benny. ‘If you think I’m going to –’

With a speed that gave her no time to react, a servo shot out and grabbed her by the arm, wrenching her off her feet and flinging her into the hole.

She fell for what seemd like a long time – long enough to flip herself over in the air desparately and spreadeagle herself in the hope of spreading the impact-surface area. She hit soft and powdery earth, jarring her spine and secondarily slamming her head back and dazing her.

‘You will stay here,’ came the voice of Shug from above. ‘You might be of use.’

Benny gasped for breath. She didn’t seem to be damaged and, strangely, all she felt was a kind of bad-tempered fury, of having been messed about quite enough, as though she had booked a holiday and it had turned out nothing like the one described in the brochure.

‘Oh yes?’ she shouted. ‘For how long? What am I supposed to eat down here?’

‘Ah,’ said the voice of Shug. ‘How remiss of me.’

There was a pause. Then came the sound of three blaster discharges.

Then the body of Jason, his sternum and stomach still smoking, was flung into the hole.

You can eat that,’ said the voice of Shug.

* * *

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‘I’ve wanted to do that for more than fifteen years,’ muttered Shug as a pair of unenhanced Skrak hauled the cover back over the hole. ‘Twenty-three and a quarter years, I mean.’

I’m sorry, Mighty Leader?’ said one of the mechanetically assisted Skrak who were attending him.

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak, who had for the last Earth-decade and a half rejoiced in the name of Shug, realized that he had been muttering in English. That was going to be a habit he’d have to break.

‘It’s Gleka, isn’t it?’ he said to the Skrak, in Skrak. ‘I remember you when you were little more than a brood-hatchling. Does the Plan still progress?’

Gleka glanced behind him to the other Skrak in the crowd. There was much paw-shuffling and nervous snout-twitching – which in a certain way was the Skrak equivalent of a grin. It was reminiscent of a collection of schoolchildren who had been left alone to conduct a chemistry experiment, and were desperately hoping, now that the teacher was back, that they’d got it right and the laboratory was not suddenly going to blow up.

‘The Plan progresses,’ Gleka said – now markedly more self-conscious and less sure of himself than the Skrak known recently by Sergeant Vim. ‘We have followed your instructions to the letter, ever since you were so cruelly sundered from us.’

Privately, the Mighty Leader of All Skrak doubted it. People who could fumble a perfectly routine teleportation back from the Earth planet – if it had been an accident – were the last people he would trust to carry out a complicated series of instructions over the course of fifteen yea. . . *twenty-three and a quarter Moriel years*. And, even if

they could, they did not have the unified and burning vision that allowed one to deal with a million little problems and setbacks and keep the greater Plan on course. The Mighty Leader of All Skrak had been keeping track of events in the Three Empires for all the frustrating time of his inadvertent exile, as he had painstakingly manoeuvred himself back to the point where he could make his return, and had seen the plan going further and further out of control.

He had all but resigned himself to the fact that all the schemes carefully laid so many years ago – and in another sense, laid over tens of thousands of years – would ultimately come to nought.

But never mind that, now. Chance had brought him back in time, just as the Plan was reaching its cumulative and terminal phase. It had been a matter of pure luck – almost a miracle – and the fact that this miracle was a secondary and unanticipated result of the Plan itself made the mighty Leader of All Skrak wonder if there really wasn't some higher power directing him. If the vision that had struck him all those years ago was, indeed, truly Holy.

But be that as it may. He was back. And back in control.

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'Show me,' he said to Gleka, whom he had known as little more than a brood-hatchling. 'Let me see what you have done.'

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

In the Summit the automata continued their unobtrusive and repetitive tasks: serving food, cleaning floors, cleaning up the accumulated mess of some three hundred people.

One of them, a gleaming approximation of a monocular humanoid head and torso with interchangeable servo-powered arms, rolling on spherical rubber bearings that served the function of wheels, was trundling through an out-of-the-way sub-corridor in the Dakhaari quadrant when it sensed that it was running low on power. It took a sharp left where, strictly speaking, no left should be, and slipped through the panel that had opened up in the previously seamless ceramic wall.

It had just connected its gearchains to the perpetually spinning motors that would recharge its flywheel, when it sensed that it was not alone.

More than one not-right things were here behind the panel with it.

The automaton's processes were mechanetically preprogrammed and basic – it simply knew that these not-right things should be outside and not in here; so it engaged its extensible blade-thing to make the not-right things go away into things that didn't move and could be cleared up.

It was at this point that one of the not-right things stuck something into its flywheel.

Sareth, Ravla and Koth looked at the remains of the automaton. The clawlike blade appendage it had produced hung at a sad angle. The clockwork had exploded out of its head.

'Is that wise?' Koth said worriedly, fully expecting instant vengeance from the Hollow Gods. Admittedly They had been unaccountably lax about such things of late, but the wilful destruction of the things They owned was pushing things a bit too far for his liking.

'It's just a thing.' The Doctor pulled his tattered umbrella from the abruptly interrupted flywheel of the mechanism. 'You can do things like that to things.

Do you remember what I was saying earlier, about taking away the right lessons?'

He produced a little cylindrical lamp from a pocket of his jacket and ran its beam over the walls of the cubicle. In contrast to the seamless finish of the corridor outside, they were finished with rough and mismatched steel plate.

'Now I think it should be. . . ah, yes, there.' He tapped one of the plates with the ferrule of his umbrella. Tink. 'That's going to come off.'

The plates were secured by strips of wire all but eaten away by rust.

Koth and Sareth manhandled the plate in question out of the way, leaving it propped against the ruined automaton, and Ravla peered through, her eyes adjusting themselves to innate Dakhaari nightsight.

'There's a hole going down,' she said. 'Like a well. There are rungs bolted to the side of it. There's something glowing but it's not very

bright.'

Koth and Sareth lit their own lanterns and the three squeezed through arid climbed down, the Doctor following at the rear. The shaft was only as deep as two largish men, and at the bottom they found themselves in a twisting, turning conduit consisting of rusting, flanged and bolted-together steel pipe.

Running through it were tubes that appeared to be extruded from molten glass. Within them a golden light pulsed dimly: just enough to be seen, not enough to illuminate.

Sareth swung his lantern slowly around him. He couldn't actually see or hear anything, but he had the disquieting feeling that things had just scuttled out of sight and hearing. 'Some network of ducts for maintenance?' he said.

'Running parallel to the main sections of the Summit?'

'More or less,' the Doctor said, dropping from the hole in the roof and landing silently and neatly beside him, like a cat. 'In a sense.

'Now I think,' he pondered, tapping his chin with his own cylindrical lantern, 'that we should be going this way.' He marched off briskly down the conduit for a few paces, skidded to a halt, stood stock still for a moment, pointed back the way he had come with his umbrella, squeezed back past Ravla, Koth and Sareth, who had started to follow him, and headed off in the opposite direction. Then he stopped again and turned to glare sternly back at the three, who were standing with their arms folded and looking at him.

'Well, are you coming or not? Who knows what perils and wonders we may find?'

Sareth, Ravla and Koth looked at each other, shrugged and followed him.

Sareth, for one; was disturbed by the enormity of the crime – but still more shocked by the fact that the possibility of committing it had never even occurred to him. Not even once.

'It was a part of your conditioning,' the Doctor had said. 'I saw the way you all moved through this place, as though it were inviolate. You built your own personal spaces within it and brought your own artifacts – but the idea of manipulating the artifact of the Summit itself was utterly alien to you. You were utterly incapable of believing

that there was anything behind the walls.

It was like a blind spot. An outside observer watching you would have known what was happening instantly, and wondered why you consistently refused to 170

see the obvious.'

'I still say you could have told us,' Ravla had said. 'Why did you have to keep toying with us by dangling little hints?'

'If I'd simply told you, you would never have been able to assimilate it. You would have simply dismissed it as nonsense, or lost it in the level upon level of overcomplication into which you've been conditioned. I had to take you to the point where you thought of it yourselves.'

Now, as they followed the Doctor along the steel-walled tunnel, Sareth realized how, all his life, he and those around him had been forced along into this action or that action by the flow of something other, blinded to the fact that it was happening by a fog of convoluted thoughts until his essential self was lost in them. Now he felt the beginnings of a true sense of self-possession.

It was something like that first manic rush he had felt upon discovering that he was Emperor – but whereas that had been a violent feeling, so violent that it had hurt, this was all the more strong because it was so matter-of-fact and unremarkable. He was here, and whole, and alive, and that was just the way things were. *He* was truly doing things and feeling things, perhaps for the first time in his life.

Of course, it might be better if the things he was feeling were other than fear and trepidation. He gathered that, so far as the Doctor was concerned,

'God' meant some character in some metaphorical and illustrative myth, or some intangible term to describe the workings of the universe in its entirety.

The problem was, so far as Sareth was concerned, that 'Gods' meant a collection of extremely powerful beings who actually existed and killed you, and if one of Them hadn't done it yet then it was only because They were biding Their time so that it was all the worse when They finally did.

When he had embarked upon this expedition into the spaces between

the walls Sareth had, as a matter of course, armed himself to the hilt and added a couple of military-caste blaster pistolas for good measure; but he had the horrible suspicion that his would avail him not at all. There were several sects on the Saloi Homeworld, and throughout the other Empires, who held that coming down with boils and so forth was a punishment for wrongdoing – but these tended to be unpopular on worlds where the deities physically *stood over you and told you what they wanted*. 'Metaphorical' and 'intangible' had hardly been the words for Them.

Up ahead the Doctor's lantern played across the walls, its light partially obscured by the labouring bulk of Koth. Ravla was directly ahead of Sareth, and she was casting about herself suspiciously as she walked.

'I wish I knew why I agreed to do this,' she muttered.

'We have to find the truth of things,' Sareth said. 'Nothing is stronger than the truth. Except perhaps a three- *gik*-old Shivri razor-rat on a stick.'

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'You know about Shivri food?' said Ravla, surprised. 'We only know it from refugees from Czhanos occupation.'

'Same here,' said Sareth. 'Our capital's filled with takeaway food stalls.'

In later years, Sareth would come to look upon this as a momentous, even crucial, moment. Quite simply, it was the first time ever that he and Ravla had merely chatted inconsequentially, without carefully weighing and formulating every utterance and strategy. Just as if they were real people.

At the time he didn't notice it.

Ravla was looking around herself again, nervously. 'You can almost hear them scuttling, can't you?' she said.

Up ahead, the Doctor suddenly halted. Koth ran into him, Ravla ran into Koth and Sareth ran into Ravla. From ahead of them there came a diffuse, lambent glow. 'We're coming to a chamber,' he said. 'By my reckoning we're at the centre of things, directly under the ballroom.' He turned back to them and put his finger to his lips. 'From here we walk softly. Big sticks being hard to come by, I'd advise you to keep

your weapons close to hand. Horrors, I feel, are never far from here.'

Given the Time Lord's unspecific but foreboding comments, Sareth had not known quite what to expect – and he had certainly expected nothing like this.

They found themselves in a circular chamber, in circumference roughly the size of the ballroom above, its ceiling a third again the height of Koth. From conduit entrances on every octant came glass strands and tubes, each pulsing with a dim golden light.

The tubes snaked through the chamber and connected to an insane and tangled mass of machinery in its centre. This mechanism, for want of a better word, seemed to be nothing more than a random and haphazard pile of junk: of cogs and ratchets and pawls, of wires and cabling and little glass tubes, of printed electronic circuitry and radio valves and hydraulic couplings.

Nothing like that should have been able to operate, and indeed its visible moving parts moved weakly and spasmodically. Several of its components glowed fitfully, with the same dim golden light as was within the tubes that connected to it, but the flickering glow seemed as healthy as the fading light in a dying man's eyes.

The mechanism, for want of a better word, and whatever it was, was patently on the last of whatever it used for legs. This was evident in the palsied tick and clack and rattle of it, in the occasional sad little fizzle of sparks from its electrics.

Koth, Ravla and Sareth looked at it.

'So what the Hells is it supposed to be?' Koth said at last.

'Well, basically,' the Doctor said, bustling over to it and peering at it interestedly, 'It's a kind of cargo-cult attempt at replicating the TARDIS. There's no way it can work, not as such, but it manages to approximate several functions.'

'What? You mean like being bigger on the inside but not in fact doing much else?' said Sareth, sardonically.

'I find that rather uncalled for, and not to mention hurtful,' said the Doctor.

He played the beam of his lamp over the convoluted bulk of the mechanism.

‘I mean that it can channel interdimensional energies to a certain extent, redi-rect them. I suspect that if we followed each of chose pipelines leading out of this room we’d come to a sub-component of a multiple antenna. I think this whole place is a massive, directional interdimensional transceiver, with the Summit itself as the coil and the mechanism here as the regulator. I sensed something of its effect, being susceptible to such things, but the locus was too wide for me to feel its exact shape.’

‘But what is it supposed to do, Time Lord?’ Ravla said impatiently. The sound of the mechanism, though weak, was drowning out ambient noise – but she, Koth and Sareth were increasingly sure that they could hear the sound of things scuttling under it.

‘On the crude level?’ the Doctor shrugged. ‘I suppose it could direct short-burst energy packets through space and time, translate relatively small objects from one point to another in the interdimensional web, and broadcast harmonics capable of structurally reorganizing brain function.’ He traced several interlocking mechanetic links to a complicated tangle of wires, like a miniature nest, and took a little bit of twisted wire from his pocket and prodded at it. The wires sparked, a bank of little carbon-filament lightbulbs flickered.

‘Observe.’

There was a sound like a thunderclap that filled their world and then, standing over them, five hundred miles tall and glaring down on Ravla, Sareth and Koth with hate-filled blazing eyes inside their ragged cowls, were the long-dreaded figures of the Hollow Gods.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Benny held the dying body to her. ‘Oh, Jason. . . ’

It felt odd in her mouth to say it. It occurred to her in a detached kind of way that this was the first time, literally the first time, that she had ever used his name. It was probably just the fact that they had spent their time together in a society of two, with no need to think in terms of more than ‘you’ and ‘me’.

She didn’t really think or feel anything else. She didn’t feel anything.

She was comforting this dying man only because, she supposed, that was what people were supposed to do. She supposed that tears were streaming down her face and she was sobbing because that's what people did.

Amazingly, he was trying to speak. 'I. . . I have to tell you something,' he croaked.

Benny stroked his face, kissed his face. 'Hush. Don't try to talk.' Baby words. Baby talking.

'I have to. It's. . . a story. It isn't very long.'

His voice failed him for a moment then he continued. 'My. . . grandfather.

My mother's father. He was on the Normandy beaches in 1944. Twenty-first Army Group. He couldn't tell anybody where he'd be going but the whole family knew it was coming. . . everybody knew the invasion was being mounted.

My grandmother gave him a silver crucifix of Jesus Christ Our Lord.

'The Germans left some snipers when they fell back. If my grandfather hadn't had the crucifix the bullet would have just clipped him. As it was, the bullet turned it into shrapnel, blew it through his left lung, kidney, liver, and intestinal tract and killed him stone-cold dead.

'That's why I never, ever took any chances, and years back I lined my jacket with a couple of layers of long-chain polycarbon micromesh. I'm going to have one of the Multiple Hells of a lot of secondary-impact bruising though.'

For almost half a minute Benny remained absolutely silent and still. Then she hit him, extremely hard.

The sides of the pit tapered inwards toward the top; it was impossible to climb.

There was no way out. Jason looked musingly up at the star-like pinholes rust had eaten in the covering.

'Shug didn't kill you when he had the chance,' he said. 'You're being kept on ice. He's going to use you for something and that means you're going to get out.'

‘Leaving you down here,’ said Benny. ‘Fat lot of use that’s going to be.’

‘Well, okay. But he thinks I’m dead. That’s got to be something in our favour.’ Jason waved a hand. ‘I don’t know; maybe they’ll lower a rope-ladder or something and forget to pull it up. Maybe you can find a way of getting something to me. It’s something to hope for, anyway.’

‘Hope?’ Benny snorted. ‘You?’

Jason grinned slightly in the semilight. ‘Hope for the best and prepare for the worst, that’s me.’

For a while they sat in silence. After a while, Jason said: ‘Um. Benny?’

Names again, Benny thought. That was the first time he’d used *hers*.

‘What is it?’ she said.

‘Some of those things Shug said. It wasn’t true, was it?’

He seemed to be trying to reassure himself ‘That isn’t what you feel?’

‘It certainly –’ Benny broke off. She had been about to say *it certainly wasn’t and don’t flatter yourself, sunshine,* but while it certainly hadn’t been true there were just enough complications to its not being true to preclude a flat denial.

I’m very fond of you, she almost thought of saying – but that wasn’t true at all.

He annoyed and infuriated her and he said things that hurt her, and she could quite happily spend the rest of her life putting him through hell for it.

Abruptly, in the way that memories do, when most of the mind’s resources are concentrating upon some peripheral aspect of what is really the truth of them, she flashed upon an instant from that fateful night on Makrath. And she really couldn’t believe she had just thought in such asinine terms as ‘that fateful night’. . .

He had hauled himself up on one elbow, lightly traced a blue-grey vein on her arm inside the elbow. ‘I just love looking at you.’ His eyes seemed simultaneously dark and flaring, like polished onyx.

‘Mm?’ She had pressed her cheek against his side, smiling up at him.

She couldn't stop smiling.

'You can look at what you like,' she said, her voice drowsy with a content-ment that had nothing much to do with ethanol or sleep. She felt perfectly clear. Instead of the familiar buzz of impending hangover, she felt as though her brain had been physically sluiced of toxins with spring water. She pressed herself closer – and was startled by the sudden surge she felt. She slid herself over a small section of his thigh. 'You can do what you like.'

Now, looking at Jason she said: 'I don't know what love is.'

That sounded so incredibly lame and trite that she added: 'I mean, it isn't about some one-night stand spent sweating and heaving whilst under the influence. It isn't. We had some fun and it doesn't have to mean anything, okay?

No big deal.'

'You're right,' said Jason. 'It isn't.'

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The way he said it stopped Benny short. By century twenty-six certain of the more unpleasant gender-based aspects of human relations had been, if not eradicated, then at least exposed and roundly condemned. The bulk-testosterone-producing half of the human race had finally realized that while testosterone built up the upper body and the arms, and gave one the aggression necessary to hit things with them, those who produced less of it tended to have several thousand more nerve-ganglia in the corpus callosum – and in an age when information technology reigned supreme, one half of the brain talking to the other was a distinct advantage.

Sexual bigotry against women was almost entirely unknown, not because men had started wearing jumpers and eating quiche overnight, but for the simple, pragmatic reason that by the twenty-sixth century it was the women who had most of the effective power. On her travels with the Doctor, Benny had occasionally come into contact with twentieth-century so-called 'non-sexist' males, and had been shocked and then appalled by their hyposcrisy and condescension.

But she had also come into contact with the very real effects of what she thought of as primitive thought-responses. She remembered Ace during the several times when she had fallen for some faker, only to

find subsequently that he regarded her as just a quick and easy shag. Jason's tone reminded her of that. Benny's depths of sympathy and commiseration at the time had always been: 'Told you. You wouldn't listen would you, y'old slapper. Didn't I bloody tell you?' – but this did not seem to be quite apposite on this occasion, for some reason.

They sat in silence for a while.

'I suppose –' they both said, simultaneously, after a while.

'What?' said Benny. 'What do you suppose?'

'Um. Nothing,' said Jason. 'Nothing, really. I wasn't going to say anything.

What did you want to say?'

'I was just thinking,' Benny said carefully. 'We're neither of us under the influence of anything, now, and I was just thinking – purely in the interest of knowledge, of course – that if we were to, say, I don't know, kiss, then we could know exactly where we stand and put all this "love" nonsense out of the way where it belongs.'

Jason thought about it. 'Okay. Yeah. Yes. I'm game.' They shifted around so that they were facing each other. Very slowly, they leant into each other, navigated each other's nose and tentatively brushed lips.

'That do anything for you?' Jason asked.

'Nothing. Not a thing.' Benny frowned in the near darkness. 'Only it wasn't really a proper test, was it? I mean if we were really going to test it then we should have tested it properly.'

They tried again, doing it properly. Benny tried objectively comparing it to the other people she had kissed, those who for some reason kept their teeth gritted and those who yawed their mouth open so that it felt as though your tongue was waving around in some dank and unresponsive cave. This was just right. It was no big deal, the simple mild pleasure of things sliding gently round each other, mouths rubbing over each other. She pulled back a little, ran her tongue slowly around his lips, comprehending the shape of his mouth – the little clefts under the septum, the curious little jag of a scar from some past minor injury – in minute detail. She ran her fingers over the

stubble on his cheek; that pleased her. There were certain structural differences between a man and a woman other than the immediately obvious, qualities and resources that were neither better nor worse but that the other could not give, and stubble was one of them. The fact that before this she would have rather eaten cold boiled rats than kiss a man with stubble was neither here nor there.

Jason took her head in his hands, softly ran his work-rough fingers over her temples and back through her hair. It seemed only natural, then, to slide the zipper of his jacket down and slip her own hands inside, working them under the vegetable-fibre shirt. Hard muscle, the occasional ridge of yet another scar, the small and almost imperceptible change in skin-texture that she would later learn to be tattooing self-inflicted with a doornail and a bottle of Quink at the age of fourteen. His body hair was soft and his nipples were man-hard. She felt his breath hitch and shudder in him as she flicked one with her finger, dug it with her nail and then grazed it slowly and lightly with the flat of her hand.

Jason's hands were on her neck and back. She slithered round a little to give him easy access to her own clothes and felt the bare-skin, surface-cold shock of his fingers before it was supplanted by their body-temperature pressure-warmth. The little distanced part of her mind that watched and waited to step in when things went wrong or dangerous braced itself for the not-quite-right handling that one tolerated for the sake of the occasional lucky hit, the reality-testing tactile exploration that left you with the nagging feeling that someone was running their hands over some artifact, albeit some loved and precious artifact, rather than something alive with responses or needs. It was just the way the world worked, the simple inability of separate bodies to communicate completely – and short of passion-killing, left-a-bit-right-abit instruction it just resulted in someone doing everything under the sun to please except hit upon the precise bit that was crying out to be touched or held or licked right *now*.

Jason pulled back her undershirt and ran his mouth and scratchy stubble over the point where the swell of the left breast devolved into the armpit, and Benny totally lost it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

In the border-zone space between the Empires a new ship appeared, though none from any of the 'ships already there detected it as

anything other than debris. It was little more than the lashed-together remains of engines with no control or guidance systems or living quarters, nothing that could sustain life within.

The lashed-together engines were malfunctioning, the 'ship' could barely make a relative crawl, its velocity measured in terms of no more than millions of miles per second.

It was coming from the direction of Kalas. It was heading in the direction of Moriel.

In the space under the known environs of the Summit, Ravla, Sareth and Koth found themselves flinging themselves prostrate onto the floor as the presence of the Hollow Gods slammed into them, concussing the minds inside their heads like a solid blow.

'No!' the Doctor cried. 'You cannot let them do this to you! How big are they? How big are they?'

A *gik* before, Sareth would have been fundamentally unable to understand what the Time Lord meant; it would have been incomprehensible to him.

Now, tendons in his neck and shoulders taut and trembling with the effort, he raised his head, aware out of the corners of his eyes that Koth and Ravla were doing likewise.

The five-hundred-mile-high Gods still towered over him, towering five hundred miles over him – he knew it was five hundred miles – in a chamber that was barely twice the height of a man. Less than a *gik* before, he would have blanky and thoughtlessly accepted this as an article of faith, just one more manifestation of the ineffability of his Gods.

Now the basic contradiction seemed to jar his brain, throw it out of kilter and derail it. He stared at the image of the Hollow Gods, and, while the pattern-recognition parts of his brain jabbered and shrieked at him, he noticed now, for the first time in his life, how the images seemed distorted, wavering slightly, like a mechanetic image for which the punchcards have been overused and worn or tom completely.

Off to one side, the Doctor did something to the churning mechanism in the centre of the chamber. The sounds of it took on a new and slightly decelerating

tone as a selection of its components shut down. Several other components speeded up. The images of the Hollow Gods collapsed in on themselves, and vanished.

For a while, even though the mechanism still roared and ratcheted away, it was as though they existed in a stunned silence. Sareth glanced from Koth to Ravia and saw the trauma in their eyes.

'An illusion,' he said, very quietly. His voice was drowned out by the machine, but the Doctor, standing by it, seemd to hear every word, and understand the mass of unspoken revelation that lay behind them.

'An illusion,' he said. 'And now I think it's time we left. Time is not on our side, in this instance. I'll try to tell you something of it as we go.'

In the space between the walls, as they made their way back through the conduit, the Doctor said: 'It wouldn't have taken much. In fact, I'm surprised it took as much as it did.'

'What did?' Ravla said. She was still shaking her head as if to clear it, blinking as though to dismiss something she could not have possibly seen.

'What are you talking about?'

'An apparatus such as we encountered back there would have produced phenomena and effect back throughout thousands of years of your history,'

the Doctor said, 'cumulatively building up an absolute belief in the reality of your Gods by a mix of mass hallucination and of actual, specific and directed devastation. Disrupting the minds and lives of individuals and entire populations, affecting their development, bringing them to the point of catastrophic war and the three of you to this Summit.' He scowled. 'It's just too convoluted – insanely so – and it smacks of over-egging. There are simpler and more elegant ways of doing something like that if you want to. Take it from one who knows.'

'And then there's the question of the mechanism itself. None of it was original, none of it was made. It seems to be scavenged from across the entire galaxy: Cyberman cybernetics, Sontaran living-crystal technology – I think I even saw several items from Earth.'

'Are you really saying,' said Koth, who hadn't heard of any of these names,

‘that the thing we saw has been controlling us for thousands of years? It looked as if it wouldn’t hold together for half a *jiik*.’

‘That’s one of the oddities of playing about with timelines,’ the Doctor said.

‘The effects have been felt for millennia, but I think it’s only been in physical existence for something like twenty years, locally speaking – and already it’s falling apart. The energies it rechannels are neither here nor there – the metaforces of the universe are balanced on an edge that makes a razor look like a plank, the merest touch in the right direction can tip them.

‘It’s falling apart because it’s a botched job ineptly maintained – the mechanism, the Summit itself, your entire history for that matter. It’s all been cobbled together out of junk and imperfectly understood principles by some person, or persons, or things unknown who confused complication with sophistication. The towering genius and the utter stupidity of an idiot savant writ large.’

Sareth was glowering with a kind of wrathful fury. Ravla and Koth, looking at him, saw that this was the result of what they themselves were feeling. The very foundations of their beings, the forces that had shaped their cultures and lives and their essential selves, now stood revealed as nothing more than some entity or entities who were patently not up to the task. Anyone who had seen the machinery behind them could tell that. It was worse than discovering that the Gods simply didn’t exist.

‘All the lives,’ Sareth spat. ‘All the deaths. All for nothing.’ Words failed him as he tried to articulate his rage, as if it were too big to get out of his mouth.

‘People must be told,’ he said at last, quietly. ‘People must be told the truth.’

‘It’s funny,’ said Ravla, ‘you don’t *sound* Saloi.’

They left the spaces between the walls and re-entered the spaces that, for more than a *gik*, had been their microcosmic world. Ravla felt utterly drained; so many shocks and reversals had occurred in such a small space of time that she found it almost impossible to think or plan. It wasn’t so much that her world had crumbled but that a section of it that had been so basic she had never even thought of it had gone,

and there was nothing to replace it.

‘What do we do now?’ she said, simply because she wanted an idea of what to do now.

‘Now? We get out.’ Sareth glared at her, still with his barely contained rage.

‘We evacuate. See if we can’t survive to tell the tale.’

‘Now, hold hard for a moment,’ Koth said. ‘We have to reach some understanding. We’ve seen something that changes certain things but we –’

Sareth rounded on him. ‘Save it for later, Koth. There’s no time for the niceties.’

For the moment, they stared each other down. Ravla, watching them, suddenly realized that their personae seemed to have in some way for the moment reversed:

Koth was thinking in qualifications whereas Sareth was asserting dominance by sheer brute force of will. Possibly it was that the Saloi’s previous shocks had inured him to a certain extent against the more recent ones. He was the only one currently in a state to cut through the extraneous matter and indecision and say that this, and this and this will be done.

And it was possibly for this reason that she saw and felt Koth backing down.

For her part, she simply agreed with Sareth. She wanted nothing better than to get away from this place, and what that would mean in any larger sense could be saved for later. She’d had enough.

‘I think,’ the Doctor was saying mildly, ‘that Sareth is right. Whatever force is in ultimate control of this place, it might not be best pleased with us by now.’

Sareth ignored him, taking in both Ravla and Koth with the air of one giving instructions to which there can be no possible argument or countermand. ‘Get your people together and get them out into your ships. Don’t start worrying about which ones are spies for anybody else – the main priority is to get people out. If we can get clear then

we can sort that out when the need occurs.' He turned away from them, and then turned back as if surprised that they were still there. 'What are you waiting for? Go.'

Chapter Thirty

In the strike-force ships hanging over Moriel, messages were received from the ground forces that a landing area had been secured – and if the messages seemed a little stilted and lacking in distinct personality it was of no matter.

Each respective ground force, so far as its mother ship was concerned, was the only one down there – and the personalities of military personnel have never been the most distinct and scintillating.

So the ships landed, following the exact coordinates they had been given, and those within watched their monitors and saw the occupying forces of their own people waiting for them, and entirely failed to notice as the airlocks were sealed with a fast-solidifying resin. Members from the forces outside connected pressure-canisters to the atmospheric life-support external vents.

Life-support malfunction alarms sounded.

It would be nice to think of the gas shot through to permeate the ships as some anaesthetic that would leave the occupants unconscious but basically undamaged. It wasn't. Those inside the ships were still thinking in terms of a systems-malfunction when their own personal and organically-evolved respiratory systems went into seizure.

In a chamber in the citadel, the Mighty Leader of all Skrak watched these events on a bank of mismatched readouts and screens. There seemed to be no common technology to them: some were of the mechanetically based technology that permeated the Empires and the Cluster beyond, some were based on crystal matrices. A particularly insane-looking and dangerous one was based upon cathode radiations.

Around the Mighty Leader of All Skrak, several other Skrak were working at similarly miscongenerous consoles. The oven-hot air hummed with different and conflicting kinds of energy, not least of which being the general excitement and trepidation of the Skrak at having their Mighty Leader back.

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak turned to Gleka, whose console he was

using. ‘What’s the status of the Summit? Show me.’

Gleka reached past him with a mechanetic arm to flick a switch remarkably similar to an old Edison switch from Earth. There was a little snap of sparks and the monitors flickered and changed to show Czhans, Dakhaari and Saloi in elegant corridors.

‘They’re still alive?’ the Might Leader of all Skrak said, a little surprised.

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‘We have the material we need,’ Gleka said. ‘They’re dispensable, now.

We’ve merely waited until the secondary parts of the Plan are in operation.

They can be disposed of at any time.’

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak watched the activities within the Summit for a moment.

‘Kill them now,’ he said. ‘Send the Otherlings in and kill them.’

On the plains of Moriel, three body-armoured figures made their way towards the distant mound. They had set off in this direction, through the fluffy landscape that they had come more and more to regard as illusory, for the simple reason that the mound was the single landmark among the pastel-coloured blandness. If something was going to happen, if differences were going to be made, they were going to happen or be made there.

Early on, the illusions that had blanketed their landing site had given out and they found themselves in the true Moriel landscape. Now they made their way slowly, hitting the ground at every flicker and flare from the energy that raged in the sky above. There was no available cover, and any moment they expected some projectile to be fired from the citadel that had appeared as if from nowhere, or from what now looked like some death growth flowering from the skin of the world, like a barrow or a drumlin. A death-thing.

Makar the Scout had not fainted away again, when the world had undergone its second and seemingly permanent transformation, but he seemed to be in shock. He stumbled along, his face pale behind his helmet, seemingly oblivious of any external stimuli.

Now Roz stopped and trained her optical-enhancement systems on the citadel. There had been activity before, the distant blur and movement of its denizens, but this was something new.

‘There’s something happening,’ she said.

‘Oh yes?’ Chris Cwej cut in his own enhancing gear. ‘Yeah. I see it.’

Shapes streamed from one of the structures of the citadel. On first sight they seemed black – but then you realized that they seemed to be black only because your suit’s optics were flatly refusing to register them. The holes they made, as mechanical pixellating mechanisms showed the space around them, were indistinct, but there was something about the movement of them, the very non-shape that they didn’t make in the world, that sent a shiver up Roz’s spine.

Around them were the smaller shapes of the creatures that they knew as Plobs. They seemed to be herding the things, herding them towards the mound.

Makar the Scout wandered over to them and squatted on his haunches. ‘It’s really quite peaceful here, isn’t it?’ he said in the serious, dreamy tones of 184

the profoundly shellshocked. ‘It’s a bit of a blow at first but it grows on you.

Sometimes I think that if we stopped all this war and learnt to talk to each other, then the world would be a far, far better place.’

Roz turned to look at Chris. ‘If he pulls a harmonica out I’m going to shoot him, you see if I don’t.’

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Chapter Thirty-One

In the Summit Ravla made her hurried way through the Dakhaari quadrant at the head of a crowd of her people, together with a few Saloi and Czhans, who had been there pursuing recently instigated relationships of various Kinds.

She hoped that any missing Dakhaar would have been found by Sareth and Koth in the other quadrants. She hoped that she hadn’t left anybody behind.

This was something of a new feeling for – an active concern for her subjects.

Before, she had existed in a kind of sanguine certainty that whatever she did to and for her people must be right, by definition, no matter how much misery and suffering in fact occurred.

But before she had been appointed under Gods, and now that deificational remit no longer obtained. And with that realization had come a new sense of uncertainty, a nagging lack of confidence. As she had ordered the command to be spread through her subjects that they were leaving, a little nagging voice inside her had wondered: who was she to tell them to do anything? She had been slightly surprised and strangely gratified to find that they obeyed without question – but then they didn't yet know about the true and fraudulent nature of their world.

She went around a curve in the main corridor that led to the airlock and thence to the warship, to find the Doctor waiting for her, leaning against a wall and casually flipping a coin. He fell into step with her, trotting alongside.

'I thought I'd make myself aware of your facilities,' he said. Ravla was panting, more through fight-or-flight responses than exertion, but the Time Lord did not seem to be out of breath at all.

'Oh yes?' she said. 'And what about your magic travelling cabinet. Your *taris*?'

'TARDIS, if you please. I think she should be safe enough for the moment.'

The Doctor smiled what he probably thought was a reassuring smile. 'And for the moment I can be of more use elsewhere.'

'I'm not so sure,' Ravla said. 'I really wonder how much of this you're doing to us, moving us around like pieces on *tzuki* tiers.'

'I don't do that,' the Doctor said. 'I told you. Not any more. Not today, at any rate. Let's just say I have a distinct knack for being in the right place at the wrong time.'

They were nearing the airlock now, and as they did so the Time Lord sud-187

denly stopped and stared at the corridor walls. Inset into them were

rings of some golden metal. Ravla overshot him slightly and then ground to a halt herself, causing a minor confused pile-up in the Dakhaari following behind.

'Now what is it?'

'Did you notice these before?' the Doctor traced the metallic insets with a finger. 'Did you notice these when you originally came into this place? A sensation of wrenching?'

'No,' said Ravla shortly. She was getting a little tired of the Time Lord pointing things out, and expecting things to be done about them without bothering to explain. If he wanted her to do something from now on, he could damned well tell her.

They were wasting time here. She stalked to the airlock, spun the wheel set into it and hauled it open.

The airlock opened out onto a blood-red, heatcracked plain under a churning sky. In the middle distance, a citadel rose, seemingly constructed from piles of junk.

The view was only momentary, and recalled only later, because it was instantly obscured by the pale and slimy, clawed and tentacled creatures who burst through the airlock like a lumpen tidal wave.

The Dakhaari survivors pelted through the Summit, past the doors that led off into barrack-rooms for guards, Ravla's private chambers, refectories and laundry rooms, the chamber where the diplomatic business was conducted upon Dakhaar turf, heading for the ballroom. Heading for the centre.

As the pale creatures had streamed through the gap, Ravla had stood stock-still, The forms of these things, the wrongness of them, seemed to explode in her mind, leaving her with an impression of teeth and eyes and claws but with no comprehension of their concrete shape. She had stood stock-still, as they came for her through the chamber of the airlock, looking at them, trying to work out what they looked like.

She was saved only by a hand grabbing her and pulling her back with a seemingly impossible force and speed, flinging her back through several startled Dakhaari.

Several of her guards ran forward, brushing past the small figure of the Doctor – it must have been he who had flung her back – attacking the advancing tide of creatures with an utter and unthinking loyalty

that, when she thought of it later, moved her deeply. They died.

‘The TARDIS!’ the Doctor had shouted. Then he had slapped his forehead with an odd expression, given the circumstances, as if he was simply kicking himself for forgetting something he was looking for, but which was not ultimately that important. ‘The ballroom! My Caligari cabinet!’

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They had run. Ravla, yet again, was struck by how her people – even though in fear for their own lives – shoved her ahead, protected her. She heard the screams behind her as Dakhaar after Dakhaar was taken by a monster, but nobody let her pause or look back. Once, again, she realized she was noticing things and thinking things about her subjects that had never occurred to her before. She hoped it would last. It made her feel bigger inside, somehow.

Of course, at the moment, that just meant that there was more of her to be in terror for her life. She had lost the Doctor in the confusion – and it now occurred to her that without him it would be impossible to get into the cabinet.

Suddenly the corridor opened out into the green-jade cavern of the ballroom. The first thing she saw, with a sudden plunge of relief, was that the Time Lord was somehow there ahead of them, pulling open the doors.

‘Inside!’ he called urgently. ‘You’ll be safe inside.’

She also saw that, from the Saloi and Czhanos quadrants, Sareth and Koth and their people were bursting through the doors.

A little while later, when she was capable of registering such things, Queen Ravla of the Dakhaari felt the first touch of genuine and strangely quiet pride that she had ever felt in her life. It wasn’t a question of consciously doing something noble or good, because on every level of doing it one consciously weighs up the implications and effects of doing it, what it will cost and gain.

The true test of nobility is to do something without thinking, because it is the only thing possible for your essential self to do – whatever the actual possibilities might be.

She viciously shoved herself away from a Dakhaar male who was trying to hustle her through the door and shoved him in before her.

She laid hold of a frightened, pale-green-faced woman and threw her in after. ‘Get in, damn you!’

She realized that both Sareth and Koth were doing the same, forcing their people to safety ahead of them – although she now also noticed, with a kind of lurch in her heart, that their people had been cut by more than half, as had hers.

Even working at desperate speed, getting almost a hundred and fifty people through a set of doors, gave the rulers time to snatch a few moments of conversation.

‘There was nothing we could do,’ Sareth muttered bittrerly, ‘We couldn’t stop them. They just came on and on. They just took us down.’

‘If the Doctor hadn’t reminded me about his TARDIS-thing,’ said Koth, ‘I think we would have been there yet, until they killed us all.’

‘ *What*?’ said Ravla.

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‘The Doctor,’ Koth said, booting a hysterical Czhan in a sarong and the wide hat of one of the spy-caste through the doorway. ‘He saved me. Helped us get away.’

‘No, that can’t be right,’ Ravla said, ‘because he –’

It was at that point that the creatures burst into the ballroom, which tended to preclude any possibility of further intercourse for a while.

A ship that was little more than a projectile, little more than lashed-together engines without control systems or life support, plunged through the atmosphere of Moriel and burned. Nothing living could have survived that heat, just as nothing at all could survive the coming impact.

At the last crucial stages of its descent, detonation retros fired, flipping the ship over. It ignited its main thruster, cushioning its landing on the Moriel plain and leaving it more or less intact. But that was purely academic. Nothing could have survived such a manoeuvre. Nothing at all.

In the TARDIS a mixed crowd of Saloi, Dakhaari and Czhans waited dumbly; with their near-escape from death, some of the suddenly

interdimensionally anomalous aspects of the situation had yet to sink in. From the doors came the multiple and muffled sound of things hammering upon them, trying to get inside.

Ravla was dimly aware that the room they were in, with the console-thing in its centre, had in some way enlarged itself to accommodate this influx of visitors. She was more concerned, however, with helping Sareth doctor Koth's arm with a length of jungle catgut and one of his nonlethal needles. Koth had been the only immediately recent casualty. The last in – and pigheadedly stubborn about being it to the last – he had caught a slash from a claw of one of the creatures that had laid his arm open.

The Doctor was fussing around them with a little box on which had been painted a blocky red cross. Eventually, Ravla could stand it no more and rounded on him.

'You knew that this would happen,' she spat. 'You knew where we were.

You led us to those things.'

'No. No I didn't.' The Time Lord seemed genuinely flustered – not simply playing the blundering fool, and getting things wrong, and all the while using it as a cover to push people where he wanted them to go. He seemed genuinely shaken. 'I would never have done anything that resulted in such pointless death. You have to believe that.'

Ravla wasn't going to give in so easily. 'I saw where we were. We're not on the space station. We're on a planet.' She waved a hand to take in the alien 190

technology, the screens on the walls. 'You had to know that, and what was outside. You told us how you travel in this thing. You had to know.'

'I – I believed we were out in space as much as you did.' The Doctor rubbed tentatively at a temple. 'It's this field that's trapping us. It's suppressing certain systems of the TARDIS, and through her my sense of where I am. I thought that was a secondary effect.' A look of indecisive worry crossed his face – so utterly out of place on it that for a moment Ravla didn't realize what it was.

'I'm starting to believe that it was something that was meant all along.' He pounded a fist into his hand with frustration. 'It's the effect of the apparatus we found. I should have wrecked it when I had the

chance, but I didn't want to alert whoever was operating it. A mistake, it seems.'

Ravla's anger abated a little. The Time Lord seemed to be telling the truth –

with the proviso, of course, of knowing that the Doctor could swear that up was down if he felt like it, and get away with it to the point where people were suddenly standing on the ceiling.

'How was it done?' she said. 'How did we get here!' Some of the brisk certainty returned to the Doctor. It was as if a moment of crisis had passed, and while another might dwell upon it he had simply switched it off.

'I think it's something to do with those insets I noticed by the airlock,' he said. 'They look like solid state serial-teleportation coils to me. I told you that the mechanism below us was capable of shifting objects through the interdimensional mesh. Hook it up to the coils and you could generate a link between, say, the airlock of a ship and an entrance of this complex. The Summit. That's why I asked you if you felt a wrenching. Did you feel anything like that, some sort of pulling, a sense of discharge?'

'I felt something,' Sareth said, looking round from where he was tying off the stitches in Koth's arm. 'A kind of electrical shock from some of my hidden weapons. One of my hingesprings fired off and almost killed one of my staff.

Morweth's staff, as it was.'

'And I never noticed,' the doctor said angrily. The anger seemed to be directed at himself 'I suppose it was the containment field – but I suspect I was a victim of the environmental blind spots that affected you, all the while I was trying to counter them. I took it at face value. I even overlooked the fact that, while we were supposed to be in a floating space station, the gravity felt as though it was real – and real gravity is entirely different from the artificial.'

Koth, who had been experimentally flexing his stitched arm – Czhans es-chewing such unmanly things as bandaging – now glanced about himself

'They've stopped. The hammering's stopped.'

They crossed to one of the screens, Ravla and Sareth half supporting

Koth, who was still suffering from a small degree of vestigial physical shock, and was complaining vehemently at this unwanted solicitude on the grounds that 191

vestigial physical shock was for poofs.

'Poof' was the nearest English equivalent to a Czhanos word meaning 'unfit-for-service'. It carried the same general weight and association, save that it was entirely unrelated to actual homosexuality which – in addition to the complex interpersonal structures of the Empires anyway – the Czhanos military practised as a matter of course, in much the same intercrural way as did the Romans and the ancient Greeks.

On the screen, the pale shapes of the monsters seemed to be falling back, arranging themselves against the sides of the ballroom.

'What are they?' Koth asked, in the tones of one who is deeply troubled by something, and after mulling it over for some time can still find no answer.

'Why can't we see them properly?'

'They might be things from something that a friend of mine once called a

"Lovecraft dimension",' the Doctor said, frowning. 'You've heard the phrase

"indescribable horror"? Things from somewhere else, so at odds with the world you know that the mind simply refuses to take them in. Either that or the Schrodinger effect of something more imaginary than real.' The frown became deeper. 'Although there's something strangely familiar about them.

Something I feel as though I should be remembering in a slightly different context. I wish I could 'put an opposable digit on. . . ah. Something new seems to be happening.'

On the screen, coming through the ballroom doors that led into the public quadrant of the Summit, came a strange procession. At the head of it came a small and ratty, furry creature in the saddle of a mechanetic unit. Several similarly enhanced little creatures made up the rear, driving before them a collection of dazed, naked and injured Dakhaari, Czhans and Saloi.

Among them Ravla saw a slightly incongruous figure, restrained by two of the creatures. Female, she judged, dressed in the torn leatherskin remains of clothing of the sort they wore outside the Empires, out in the independent sectors of the Cluster.

'Oh no. . . ' The voice was so small and frightened that for a moment she was utterly unable to work out whose it was. Then she shot a glance at the Doctor, saw that he had gone a deathly pale, and realized that the female outside had the same general physiology, if markedly taller and remarkably more attractive. The female of the species?

'Who is it?' she said.

'I –' The composure seemed to have utterly left him.

Then he visibly recovered, and turned to look at Ravla with the sort of calm that can be achieved only by someone desperately trying to prevent himself from going frantic.

'I'm the Doctor,' he said. 'And that's my friend, Benny.'

Chapter Thirty-Two

Jason sprawled moodily against the wall at the bottom of the pit, gazing up at the circle of light from where the covering had been removed, his limbs adopting postures in which he could very easily fake death, should anyone look down on him. He was also conserving his strength; he was starting to consider the possibility that he might end up dying from thirst, lack of food being merely the secondary concern after worrying if it ever rained here.

His mind drifted back to the all-too-brief time that Benny had been in here with him. At least he had that to take with him, however long it took. He turned it over in his head like some jewel discovered in a pocket while looking for a crust of bread: utterly useless in present circumstances, but precious and solid and perfect. You could lose yourself in it.

It had been as different from that night on Makrath as that had been from every other time before, whether with human or alien. Despite the heat of it there had been a kind of stillness inside, a solemnity, even sanctity. Afterwards they had curled together, not saying anything, and Jason had felt how her heart was beating the same

rhythm as his, her lungs in synchronization with his. She must have been doing it, somehow, because he wasn't doing anything.

Looking back this little way, Jason suspected that the moment anyone had said anything the magic would go away and they'd start to row again –

but then they'd simultaneously realized that porking away like a paraplegic butcher was not a good idea when Shug or one of his kind might turn up at any minute, and had hurriedly dressed themselves from their tangled and discarded clothes.

Just in time, for at the precise moment they had heard the covering overhead scraping back. Jason hit the ground, unfortunately face first, so he had only heard what followed.

A mechanical sound, possibly a winch of some kind. 'Out,' the voice of Shug had said. 'Your friend has contrived himself a bolt-hole and I need you to bring out him and the vermin he attempts to protect.'

'What friend?' Benny had said. 'I don't have the faintest idea of what you're talking about.' She said it absolutely as though puzzled, but maybe because they were still a little in tune Jason got the feeling that she knew perfectly well what Shug was talking about.

'Don't play games,' the voice of Shug growled. 'Out.' The sound of the 193

winch ascending, the receding of feet and hydraulic pads on hard earth, and then silence. After a while Jason turned over and looked around for something, anything, that had changed. Apart from the lack of Benny nothing had changed. There was still no way out.

A little while after that he heard the scrape of boots. He held his breath and held his body still, fighting back the sudden urge to sneeze for the first time in days – a situation that is absolutely mandatory for such times.

The silhouette of a head appeared in the mouth of the hole. Then it withdrew.

'Nothing there,' said a strangely metallic male voice, muffled by the earth and the fact that it was speaking softly, like a speaker with the gain turned down. 'just the body.'

'Oh hell,' said a similar but female voice. 'That must have been

horrible for her.' It paused. 'Let's get moving.'

For a moment Jason lay immobile, mulling over the exchange, and especially the fact that it had been conducted in English, in the same slightly weird accents as used by one Bernice Summerfield.

'Uh, excuse me?' he called. 'Can you hear me? I need a little bit of help down here and. . . Hello?'

In the border zones between the Empires the first skirmishes were assayed.

These were more of the nature of preliminary probings, testing the relative strengths of each force along the lines.

No more than four hundred thousand Dakhaari, Czhans and Saloi died in them.

Roz Forrester looked at the man they had hauled from the pit by way of their Glorious Czhanos Space Army standard-issue climbing lines. Tall and whipcord-muscular and monkey-lithe like a spacer. His unkempt ragged hair and the stubble on his chin gave him a slightly piratical air.

There were blaster-bums on the front of his leather jacket and the rest of his clothing was battered to shreds, though probably not as battered as the body inside it. He was covered with minor injuries, from bruises and cuts to vacuum lesions. He didn't seem to notice them. Roz, who had survived her recent and temporary life at war with nothing more than a skinned knee from a slightly faulty pad in her armour, felt obscurely ashamed. On the other hand, as it were, her knee really was giving her gyp.

The man regarded her with a grin that in another time and place would have had her keeping an especial hold on her money, because he would probably rip it off while you were still asleep the next morning – having got inside your pants almost directly after the moment he started to grin at you. If he 194

was nervous or afraid he didn't show it. His eyes were watchful, however, tracking from her to Chris, who was keeping watch on the citadel's structures and holding onto Makar the Scout to stop him wandering off.

'Thanks a lot,' he said, his voice rough from dust an dehydration. 'Though I have to wonder how you go here. It seems a little. . .

suspicious that the things here let you in.' He shifted his weight almost imperceptibly – and Roz knew, from years of experience as an Adjudicator on the streets, that he was readying himself to fight without mercy or quarter if it came to it. 'If you don't mind me saying so.'

'We avoided them,' she said. 'It was easy.' She frowned inside her helmet.

'Strangely so, as a matter of fact. There are a lot of them about, but most of them seem to be wandering around like they didn't know there was a war on.

Hardly the sort of behaviour you'd expect from things who could wipe out a whole invasion force.

'Roz,' Chris said. 'We're wasting time here. We saw those things take Benny into the mound and –'

'Benny. . . ' For a moment the battered man stared at the ground as though lost in thought. Then he looked up again, his mouth set in a cold and teeth-gritted snarl. He pointed to the impact-rifle Roz had taken from Makar the Scout until he felt a little better, and which was now strapped to her backpack.

'Give me that.'

'Now wait a minute,' Roz said. 'We don't know who you are or –'

The man took a step towards her, and something in his eyes made her take a quick step back, despite the fact that she was armed and armoured.

'If you don't give it to me I'm going to take it,' he said. 'You can try to kill me and you probably will, but either way I'm going to get my hands on that gun. So give me the gun.'

Chapter Thirty-Three

In the ballroom in the centre of the Summit, the Mighty Leader of All Skrak glanced about himself. The Otherlings were arrayed around the walls, mindlessly waiting to fall at the command of the Mighty Leader of All Skrak, upon anything and everything that emerged from the Time Lord's conveyance. The force of Skrak numbers was more than

enough to take care of any survivors.

He had regained personal control of the Plan, now. He was back in control.

He was now in complete and utter control.

Bolted to the frame of his mechanetic support, now, within easy reach of his paws, was the sole unit that operated the thing below the Summit, the thing he had caused to be built from the things they had found when he and his people had first come to the planet Moriel. The thing that had changed the histories of planets for star systems around. The thing that had enabled the Skrak to take and trap a Time Lord. The thing that had allowed the Skrak subsequently to scavenge and locate the precise components, to leave for the Skrak to find so that the Mighty Leader of all Skrak could cause it to be built in the *first* place.

He remembered how the image of it had burnt in his mind, how it had seemed that he was piecing together something that had almost already, but not quite, always existed.

The readouts being relayed from the thing were erratic now. It was finally falling to pieces. But no matter – it would last for long enough. Long enough to see the fruition of the Plan.

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak turned and gestured to Gleka, who stood behind him to one side and now passed him an old tin megaphone.

'You will come out now,' the Mighty Leader of All Skrak boomed squeakingly through the megaphone. 'You will come out or we will kill our prisoners.'

'How did they get here?' Ravla said, staring at the screen. 'How do these things have prisoners from our own kinds?'

Koth seemed chagrined. 'I ordered a troop detachment to invade Moriel some time ago. It seemed like a perfectly good idea at the time.'

'Oh yes?' said Ravla. 'I think that shows how far you can *really* trust a Czhan.'

'It strikes me,' said Sareth musingly, 'that I see quite a number of Dakhaari out there, too.'

‘That’s perfectly natural,’ said Ravla hotly. ‘Of course it’s only natural to preserve our interests in the face of the obviously foul treachery of –’ She peered at the monitor closely. ‘Exactly how many Saloi do I see, as a matter of interest?’

‘Well, obviously, I never denied –’ Sareth began. ‘Then he suddenly turned to stare off to one side ‘Doctor? Where are you going?’

Seemingly oblivious, the Time Lord was standing by a coat rack that for some reason all of them had entirely failed to notice before. He had taken off the worn and elbow-patched brown jacket that had seemed so mismatched with his other attire and was buttoning up a pale and baggy vegetable-fibre jacket of the same stuff as his trousers. He took a white hat, reminiscent save in colour, of the black hats worn by the spy caste throughout the Three Empires, and jammed it on his head.

His face was pale, his mouth set in a tight and thin-lipped line.

‘I’m going out there,’ he said as the three rulers gathered round. ‘Don’t try to stop me.’

‘I’m not going to,’ said Ravla. ‘I’m going too.’

The other two nodded in agreement.

‘No you’re not,’ said the Doctor firmly. ‘There’s nothing you can do and it would serve no purpose. I won’t allow it.’

‘You can’t stop us,’ said Sareth.

At this point it consciously dawned on all three that, yet again, they were thinking in a new way. They had done certain things before – taking their trip into the spaces between the walls, for one – out of a kind of self-importance or because it was expected of them. They were the leaders and they were damned well going to do it. Now they were going to go outside simply because the things outside were going to kill the prisoners, and they were going to try to stop it happening, even at the cost of their lives.

Their subjects, it seemed, had other ideas.

The crowd of Czhans and

Dakhaari and Saloi had got over their disorientation to some degree and had been following events in silence. Now they started up a clamour. The general consensus seemed to be that they would not allow their rulers to put themselves in danger.

Ravla, Koth and Sareth rounded on them. By some unspoken agreement it was Sareth who spoke for all three.

'We're going,' he said. 'None of you are to try to help us, even if we die. The only people you will leave this place to help are your fellows out there, if the things outside start killing them. Is that clear?'

He didn't say it forcibly, he didn't say it in any particular way, but the Dakhaari, Czhans and. Saloi visibly gave in to him, though they were obviously none too happy about it.

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'Thank you,' said Sareth simply. All three turned back to the Doctor – to find that he was already halfway to the doors and moving at a rapid lick.

They sprinted after him and made it to the doors, tumbling through them in a confused three-way heap that slightly embarrassed them because they'd wanted to go out with a kind of stately and noble heroism.

To either side of them the pale monsters seemed to waver and loom, without ever quite becoming distinct. Ahead of them were the ratty little creatures and their prisoners, who seemed to exist in a sort of tangible daze except for the restrained humanoid woman, who was glaring about herself with an expression that seemed compounded in equal measures of relief, exasperation, joy, anger, worry and spite.

Before them stood the small figure of the Doctor, looking lost and alone.

The mechanetically enhanced creature that seemed to be these things'

leader was addressing him.

'Well, Time Lord,' it sneered. 'We meet again.'

In the border zones the first major conflicts were reported. Acceptable losses were reported on all sides. No more than a million.

On the plains of Moriel, if an observer had been there, he would have seen heavy track marks impacted into the hard-packed, heatcracked earth, heading in the direction of the mound and the citadel of the Skrak.

'I'm sorry,' said the Doctor, 'but you seem to have the advantage of me. If we'd met before I'm sure I would recall.'

Benny in her restrained position between two of the creatures like Shug, looked the Time Lord over. He was just as she remembered, in his pristine linen suit and fedora, radiating the unconsciously superior self-possession that comes from simply being superior, and still with the exact same knack for picking precisely the right words to infuriate anything from a Humungous Intergalactic Overlord to a small local whelk.

All would be well, and well, and all manner of things would be well. The Doctor was in.

The sense of joyful relief and reassurance she had felt upon seeing the TARDIS, against all expectation was redoubled at the sight of the man. Once again she was struck by the unquestioning loyalty and even love she felt for him, only –

Only?

She still felt the same. She felt exactly the same about the Doctor as she ever had. It was not that he had diminished in any sense – but now, in some strange way that she could not quite put her finger on, he had somehow ceased to be the touchstone and the talisman of her life in a way so basic that 199

to think in terms such as like or dislike was as nonsensical as professing love to your right hand. He was still that important to her, only now it was as if she knew somebody who was as important as her head and who-Oh bloody hell. No. *Absolutely not.*

Shug, meanwhile, was glaring at the Doctor with his three little beady eyes.

'You are lying, Time Lord. All your puny kind must needs tremble at the mention of our name. Are you going to stand here and tell me that you have never heard –' he paused dramatically '– of the *Skrak*?'

The Doctor looked at him in puzzlement. 'The who? Mind like a sieve these centuries. Sorry. Although –' he turned to look at one of the

monstrous pale creatures gathered around the walls, and then back to Shug.

'I seem to recall a similar kind of arrangement amongst certain lower forms of Gallifreyan life,' he said. 'The vestigial result of the fallout from early intertemporal experimentation. A parasitic symbiosis of extradimensional creatures and mammalian rat-vermin, their life-cycles looping back on each other in an accelerated process of macro-bootstrapping, reliving the same few weeks of time over and over again, simply existing because they do. The fact of living in a self-enclosed temporal gerbil-cage, as it were, seemed to drive them half mad with frenzy and paranoia – I would never have believed the process on any larger scale could be sustainable. Tell me –' he peered at Shug closely

'– have you and your people, these creatures of yours, have you actually existed in the physical and literal sense, for more than twenty years? I'd be very surprised if you had.'

'It's a lie!' Shug shrieked. 'We have always been! We have changed the universe for star-systems around to make it so! Even now the forces of these Empires are engaged in the final war that will destroy them all and –'

'No!'

The voice would have rung around the jade dome like thunder, had the acoustics not been deadened by the things around the walls. Benny turned her head to see the figures who had spilled out of the TARDIS after the Doctor. The extremely pulchritudinous female Dakhaar in the jewelled bikini and the big humanoid with tusks and in Hussar-like uniform were attempting to restrain the frantic struggling of the wiry, hawklike man in leather.

'Kill you for this!' He was shouting, almost incoherent in his rage. 'Kill you for what you did to us! Make you dead and kill you now!'

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ravla tried to keep hold of the frantically struggling Sareth. She knew how he felt. She had thought that things could not possibly get worse – and then she had seen exactly what it was that had done these things to her culture and history and to herself It was like a blow to her stomach.

But she was also aware of the sheer strength of the forces arrayed against them, had not as yet detected any chink in their collective armour. Now was not the time for mindless heroics that would simply serve to get them killed for no point.

'It's like a Czhanos berserker rage such as was told of in the days of old,' Koth exclaimed as he restrained Sareth' from the other side, a note of admiration in his voice. 'I never knew he had it in him.'

'That's not what I've heard,' Ravla snapped short-temperedly.

'Listen,

Sareth! This is not the time!'

The Saloi, however, merely disengaged himself from them with such smooth adroitness that for an instant they were left clutching at thin air and wondering what had happened. The moment he did so, as though a switch were thrown inside him, he seemed to become calm. He pulled one of the pistolas slung from his side, and calmly raised it to point at the little creature.

The creature did something to the control unit bolted to its mechanetic support. Instantly, towering over everyone and filling the cavernous chamber, were the slightly flickering forms of the Hollow Gods.

Sareth twitched, once, automatically. The gun wavered – and then tracked back until it was again aimed directly at the creature.

'Not this time,' he said. 'Not any more.'

'Then what about this?' The creature pressed another control on its patchwork console.

It was only now that Ravla noticed that there had been an additional arrival in the ballroom. Several of the automata that had serviced the Summit had entered and spent their time puttering unobtrusively around. They had become so familiar by now that she had completely failed to notice them.

She noticed them now only because one had shot out a buzzing, bladed servo-appendage and neatly severed Sareth's gun hand, sending-it flying in a spray of blood, still tightly gripping the gun as the fingers went into spasm.

Ravla stared at Sareth, uncomprehending. In some way it was as though she herself had been maimed.

The automaton grabbed Sareth as he clutched at the bleeding stump, trying to halt the bleeding. Ravla hardly knew nor cared when hard servo-claws took hold of her and rendered herself and Koth immobile.

The creature looked at them, a cracked and not entirely healthy madness in its eyes. ‘You should be dead already. You would have died but for the pernicious interference of the Time Lord. I was going to simply kill you, but now I think I’ll let you realize the true depths of your defeat before you die.’

It touched another button on its console. Reverberating through the ballroom came the static-laden clamour of thousand upon thousand of desperate communications from ships at war.

‘Do you hear!’ the creature said. ‘They will die in their millions. Attack forces have already broken off and are heading for the nearest planets to wipe them clean.’ It pointed at them with a little paw, gestured towards the Czhanos, Dakhaari and Saloi prisoners. ‘We instigated a little subtle subterfuge to bring some of your ships to us – knowing that each of you would try to take this planet by sneaky treachery – and in them we will take control of the blasted wreckage that remains, and from there spread to take the Cluster, and then the galaxy, and then the *universe*!’

‘Marvellous.’

All eyes snapped back to the Doctor. For a while it had seemed as if he had faded into invisibility but now, once again, he was the focus of attention.

Ravla could see only his back, but from his posture and his tone it was obvious that he was not entirely impressed.

‘Quite marvellous,’ he said. ‘I stand aghast with wonder and admiration at your plan. I can see you’ve really thought it through.’ Only an idiot could have taken his praise seriously. ‘But, I ask myself,’ he pondered, ‘what has this to do with me. Why bring me here?’

The little creature preened a little, obviously buying it wholesale. ‘For the powers of your time craft,’ it said. ‘For revenge as well, of course, but mostly for your time craft. On our travels through the galaxy to

find parts for our own machine, we found it on the satellite of the Earth-planet and saw what it was. You didn't notice us. It was very easy to rewire your controls and secrete the triggering mechanism for them about your person with our nimble fingers.

You have changed, since then, but we knew you would eventually find it.'

The creature gestured towards the Doctor's magic cabinet. 'With this we will perform upon the universe what we have already performed upon the Three Empires. With the powers of your time craft under our control, *nothing* will stand in our way.'

'And just suppose,' the Doctor said quietly, 'that I don't propose to let you.'

'Oh, but you will.' It turned to regard the humanoid woman, who spat at him angrily.

'Your companion,' the creature said, snuffling its nose in a sneering manner. 'You will obey my every command or her shrieks of agony will be most heartrending and numerous!'

'Don't listen to him Doctor!' the woman shouted. 'He isn't worth it! He's just a jumped-up little clown!'

'A clown does not bite you and throw you in the cellar,' the little creature told her menacingly.

'I must admit that I did rather wonder where she'd gone,' the Doctor said.

He didn't seem particularly concerned – and Ravla, looking at the woman, caught a complex expression flashing across her face. It seemed to be compounded of confidence and pride at the Time Lord's handling of the creature –

but with a little half-suppressed and worried edge that wondered if the Doctor's apparent disinterest might not be in fact genuine. That he really didn't care for or about her as much as she hoped. Ravla knew how she felt.

'I would very much like to know what you did to her,' the Doctor said, as if he couldn't care less but supposed he had to say something

anyway. ‘And to Roz and Chris, for that matter.’

‘My people plucked her from your craft. I knew from my observations through space and time that the mere presence of one of your young and plucky females could be disastrous. But when they came to do it my people couldn’t find a young female, so they disposed of the nearest available alternative.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ muttered the woman.

‘The intention was simply to throw her into a sun,’ the little creature said,

‘but even then the Changing Machine was beginning to malfunction and she ended up alive and on a planet. My people were forced to send Killing Things after her to make quite sure she died.’

‘And the others?’ the Doctor said. ‘Chris and Roz!’

The creature waved a negligent paw. ‘The even older woman and the man were simply discarded at random and forgotten about. I had left no instructions as to what should happen if more than one other was travelling with you. I have no idea where they are, but it is of no matter. They were of no consequence.’

‘Oh I wouldn’t say that,’ said the Doctor. ‘I think you’d be surprised.” He turned to regard the woman briefly. ‘It would also seem that even your explicitly instructional machinations failed. She seems remarkably fit and well for somebody who’s been *disposed* of.’

‘That was my doing,’ the little creature said loftily. ‘By pure chance the stupid Earthman I was using encountered her – and I immediately realized 203

that this was my chance to return home.’

‘Earthman,’ the Doctor said. Something in his tone suggested that the little three-eyed alien creature was lying. ‘That’s unlikely, given our current point on the overall timeline.’

The creature bristled. ‘I was on the Earth-planet overseeing the selection of certain vital objects, and as I made my return the stupid Earthman became entangled with me in the translation beam. It threw my delicate and extraordinarily brilliant calculations off, and left me stranded in the Cluster with no way back. I spent years manipulating the stupid Earthman to bring me back.’

‘And you completely failed until your lucky meeting with my young friend,’

said the Doctor.

‘Another Time Lord lie!’ the little creature squeaked. ‘I would have made it soon, very soon indeed. I would have –’ It stopped suddenly, cocked its little head in thought. ‘Why am I bothering to tell you this? You’re keeping me talking, that’s what you’re doing.’ It’s paw hovered over the console as it contemplated which control to press. ‘I think I’ll just kill you. Kill you all.’

It was at that precise point that one of the sets of double doors exploded into shrapnel. Ravia saw it was the doorway leading into the Saloi quadrant.

Through it came a large figure and a smaller one in the power-armour of the Glorious Czhanos Space Army. With them and toting an impact-rifle was a battered-looking man of the same species as the captive woman and, presumably, the Doctor. If so, it certainly made the Doctor’s species worthy of further, and not to say closer, investigation in certain areas. Ravla filed the new arrival away for later – if there was a later. Now was not the time.

Bringing up the rear was a third armoured figure who seemed to be a little out of it and was wandering around in circles.

‘Benny!’ the man stared straight at the woman – who had for some reason put a hand over her eyes, even despite the difficulty imposed by her mechanetic restraint – and then tracked his gun around the chamber, taking in the servo-assisted furry little creatures, the monstrous Otherlings, the captives and the automata.

‘Oh, shit,’ he said.

Chapter Thirty-Five

‘There’s a lot of people here,’ Chris Cwej said worriedly.

‘Yeah, well we’ve got a lot of ammunition.’ Roz swept her gun around herself and fired a short-range burst from her flamer attachment, just so that people would get the message.

‘The first one to make a move gets it!’ she shouted. They had come

through the mound through what she would later learn was the Saloi quadrant, and some of the things she had seen there had convinced her that she was going up against some serious sickos. 'Do you need any help, Doctor?' she called to the Time Lord, who seemed to be just standing there, staring down one of the creatures she still thought of as Plobs, in a mechanetic exo-rig.

'I'm perfectly all right, Roz,' the Doctor said, not turning round to look at her. He sounded concerned. 'I'd advise you two to be careful, however. Things may not be exactly as they seem.'

Somewhere behind her, Makar the Scout was saying, in a dreamy voice:

'Look at those big things. They're the things that were very, very big. Big.

They're *big* things. . . '

Roz tuned him out. She was aware that, off to one side, the man they had pulled out of the hole was making his way towards Benny – who seemed to be almost as battered as he was in her leatherskin clothes a size too big.

Letting Chris cover her, she headed for the naked humanoids she recognized as Czhans, Dakhaari and Saloi – recognized some of them as individuals.

'Out of the way.' She waved her impact rifle at the Plobs who seemed to be guarding them and they scattered. She turned to the largest of the Czhanos prisoners. 'Vim. Get your people together. Get hold of these jokers' weapons and we can –'

She suddenly sensed that there was something slightly odd about Sergeant Vim. He was standing stock-still, staring straight ahead, his eyes dead and vacant.

'Vim?' she said.

The last thing she saw was his fist come up, faster than was humanly and for that matter Czhanically possible, and then blackness slammed into her brain.

'Come on, Benny,' Jason said 'Let's get you out of here.'

'Oh you stupid bloody idiot,' Benny said. 'How could you be so

stupid!'

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'Hey, what?' Jason was feeling mighty heroic and he really thought that Benny ought to be a bit more grateful.

He was suddenly aware of a scuffling and thumping to one side. The voice of the male soldier he had just recently met shouting something about how he couldn't, just couldn't, start shooting his own comrades.

'Well *I* sodding can.' Jason muttered. He turned and brought around his gun, just as the mechanetic claw hit him.

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak regarded the unconscious bodies of the surviving soldiers contentedly. He switched off their ex-comrades' implants and returned them to immobility. Then he turned his attention to the stupid human, gripped about the throat by an automaton.

'I thought I'd killed you,' he said happily. 'But never matter – that just means I'll get to kill you all over again along with everybody else.'

The Mighty Leader of All Skrak reached for his console again.

'Not so fast!' cried a squeaky voice.

'What?' the Mighty Leader of All Skrak turned to face the Skrak by his side –

who was now pointing a blaster pistola at him, still with the Saloi Emperor's severed hand around it, gripped between a pair of servo-assisted claws.

'Gleka?' the Mighty Leader of All Skrak said, absolutely astounded.

'Yes, Gleka!' snapped the Skrak. 'And your days of Mighty Leadership are at an end!'

'Just you wait,' Benny hissed furiously, from where she was restrained between two servo-assisted Skrak. 'Just you wait till you get killed and come running to me. I'm never going to speak to you again!'

'Grarg!' said Jason, the automaton's claw still around his throat. 'Gragle rek brugh ghaarg!'

Benny sniffed and pointedly ignored him, turning her head away to

see what was happening elsewhere – and got a small surprise. The creature that she still knew as Shug was being faced down by another one just like him with a gun.

'Yes, I was just a brood-hatchling,' it was saying, 'but even then I knew the lust for power.' It took a step back. 'It was easy to sneak into the control chamber and change your calculations. It was I who left you stranded in the Cluster. It was I who learnt all the secrets that you kept from us, and learnt how to place the Otherlings under my personal control! Like this!'

From the creature came a complex, high-pitched and polyphonic trilling.

Around the edge of the ballroom dome, the monstrous Otherlings stirred. As a mass they began to inch forward, a slight distortion in the ring of them, 206

even in the initial stages, making it perfectly obvious that the focus of their attention was Shug.

Shug stared at Gleka the usurper with three increasingly fearful eyes. 'You have learnt all my secrets?'

'That I have,' said the little creature.

'All of them?'

'Yes.'

'How to tune the catching-things so that they don't suddenly turn things inside out?'

'I know how to do that,' said Gleka, smugly.

'How to make a special cordial so that the Dakhaar rotifers will do your bidding and thus spy upon that savage race for you?'

'Yep,' said Gleka the usurper.

'How to tell when a Czhan is near terrified to death by the way his tusks rotate?' said Shug.

'I know everything.' Gleka the Skrak took a step back on his hydraulic feet to allow the advancing Otherlings past him when they came.

Shug discreetly pressed a button on his console and Gleka dropped

with a cry as the floor fell out from under him.

‘The positions of the extremely deep trapdoor shafts, with extremely sharp and jagged spikes at the bottom? Oh. I see that you don’t.’

‘Right!’ said the Mighty Leader of All Skrak. He whistled the Otherings back into their previous positions, then turned to glare at the other assembled Skrak. ‘Before we proceed any further, is there anybody else who feels like having a pop? I just thought I’d ask. Can we continue, then? If it’s all right by *you*?’

The assembled Skrak shuffled their various feet and looked away, snuffling their noses bashfully.

‘All right then.’ The Mighty Leader of All Skrak turned his attention back to the large assortment of captives it now had to deal with, and how to despatch them entertainingly. ‘Now which should it be?’ he mused. ‘The Otherlings?

The Skrak? The automata? The altered soldiers. . . ?’

And it was at that point that there came an approaching, clanging, metallic stamping from without. It seemed to be coming from the doors of the public sector of the Summit. From behind him.

‘Oh, what is it this time?’ The Mighty Leader of All Skrak threw his paws in the air.

He turned just as the doors buckled and then burst explosively open.

And something came through them.

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Jason was now struggling desperately in the grip of the automaton, adding several lacerations and bruises to a body already covered with them.

‘Oh no. . . ’ Benny breathed, staring at the thing coming through the doors.

‘It’s still coming. It never stops. It’s still coming after us!’

It must have once been two huge automata run on internal combustion and clockwork. Now it was a misshapen, hideous amalgamation lurching upon three limbs – one of which was the remains of an arm – a single eye blazing like a red sun in the flattened

remains of a head connected to the shoulder socket of a torso.

And in what remained of its brain was a single, disrupted command-string:

+ + HUNT + + ENSURE + +

[PRIME CONTROL] + + + DESTROY + + +.

Shug stepped back to let it out of the way as it came forward, scattering the other assembled Skrak – and then more hurriedly back as he realized that it was coming after him.

'No,' he said quietly. 'Not now. Not *now*. . . '

He whimpered, still backing slowly away – and found himself backed up against the magic cabinet of the Time Lord.

And the amalgamated thing came, inexorably, on.

It stopped before him, rocked slowly back and forth, scanning him with its blazing searchlight eye.

And then it jumped on him.

It jumped up and down until Shug was completely squished, and then it switched itself off.

The Doctor, who had stepped sharply out of the way to let the Mighty Leader of All Skrak and the amalgamated monstrosity past, now regarded the slowly spreading stain a little sadly. 'Foiled at the last by his own convoluted, backfired plans. I know the feeling.' He shrugged, paying no heed to the various other dangers in the room. 'It had to come at some point. Bit of an anticlimax, really.'

The Otherlings around the walls were now increasingly restive, edging forward again. The Skrak were casting about blindly, reaching for their weapons as the Time Lord advanced upon them, but with an air of not being quite sure what to do with them.

Koth and Ravla and Sareth were struggling against the automata that held them – Sareth hampered by catastrophically progressive anaemia and the fact that he did not have the use of his hands, one still clutching the stump of the other in an attempt to retain a working minority of blood.

And then the TARDIS doors were wrenched open, and unseen hands shoved over with a crash the deactivated amalgamated automaton that was blocking it. A mixed crowd of Czhans, Dakhaari and Saloi poured out, dispersing to head for the Skrak and the Otherlings and brandishing their weapons.

A party of them broke off to assist their leaders.

'I thought we told you to stay inside,' Koth said to one of them, a Saloi female with a shaven head and an Athame that seemed huge in her small and doll-like hands.

'We couldn't stand it any more,' she said, nodding her head to him as though it were he who were Emperor. 'We had to do something. We had to try to help you in the end.'

The battle was over almost before it had begun; the Otherlings apparently needed specific instructions to act and merely milled about mindlessly. The mixed crowd of Czhans, Saloi and Dakhaari soon put them to the sabre, Athame and spiky club.

The world outside was a different matter. The air of the dome was still filled with thousand upon thousand of transmissions of war. Millions were going to die.

'What are we going to do?' Ravla was tying off the arteries in Sareth's stump while Koth kept pressure on a makeshift tourniquet torn from her halter straps. 'How can we stop all this?'

Various people were mopping up the last of the living Otherlings. Others were herding confused-seeming Skrak out of the dome. Off to one side the two troops in Czhanos armour, having recovered consciousness, were conferring urgently with the Doctor while the third sat crosslegged on the floor and played with his helmet.

Off to the other, the woman who had been referred to as the Time Lord's companion and the man who had come in with the troops were conferring rather more intimately. The man glanced over in Ravla's direction, said something to the woman, and the intimacy instantly dissolved into a furious argument. Something about giving one's right arm.

'I don't think we can stop it,' Koth said. 'It has its own momentum, now.'

For someone of a supposedly military race, he seemed sick to his

stomach at this futile loss of life. ‘We have to get some communications operating,’ Sareth said weakly. ‘It’ll take sometime, but if we can tell them, tell the truth about the Hollow Gods, then we can – ‘

‘You’re perfectly right,’ said a voice. They looked up to see the Doctor looking down on them and smiling. ‘The truth of things must always come out.

Only, for the moment, If I might make a small suggestion. . . ?’

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And throughout the Three Empires, on every Homeworld and every colony planet and satellite and in every ship in space, the dreaded figures of the Hollow Gods appeared, and made a pronouncement to every population as they flung themselves prostrate in supplication.

‘ *THE PEACE TALKS HAVE BEEN DEEMED TO BE AN UNQUALIFIED SUCCESS,* ’ they pronounced.

‘ *THERE IS TO BE A BETROTHAL, SANCTIONED*

UNDER NATURAL LAWS AND WITH THE BLESSING OF YOUR GODS. RAVLA OF THE DAKHAARI SHALL MARRY SARETH OF THE SALOI AND KOTH OF

CZHANOS. TOGETHER WILL THEY RULE IN HARMONY. PEACE AND ACCORD

SHALL BE THE ORDER OF THE DAY. JOY WILL BE UNBOUNDED. THERE WILL

BE MUCH REJOICING. ’

There was a brief pause.

‘ *OR ELSE.* ’

And then, for the last time ever, the Hollow Gods vanished, as if they had never existed in the first place.

In the chamber underneath the ballroom of the Summit the Doctor looked around at the scattered, mangled smoking remains of the mechanism, which he had slightly disrupted by way of the judicious application of his umbrella, and then turned to regard Ravla and Sareth and Koth. ‘That ought to hold them for a while.’

He smiled, and winked. ‘I always knew that things would sort themselves out in the end,’ he said virtuously. ‘And without any interference whatsoever from me.’

Epilogue

There remains very little else to tell.

Communications were re-established between Moriel and the Empires, using the equipment that each faction had surreptitiously brought along, and those in the Summit learnt that peace had spontaneously broken out – the first time ever, probably, the Doctor said, that it had done so in the history of the universe.

The full story of the events that had taken place in the Summit, and the revelation of the true nature of the Hollow Gods, did little to dampen the general mood of celebration, partly because of the tremendous if fraudulent kick that had set it in motion – but mostly because it was now optional, which made it all the more heartfelt. The process of coming together that had been played out microcosmically now began in the macrocosm of the Empires themselves.

People even began to think in terms of reopening relations with the Cluster outside. Perhaps it was the fact that people knew, deep down inside, that they had been manipulated, that made these sudden reversals so easy to accept.

Yet some people couldn’t, or simply wouldn’t. Certain die-hard sects pronounced that the removal of the Gods just meant that they had elevated Themselves to a Higher Plane, while others held that it meant the End of Worlds was at hand. A number of these sequestered themselves away behind hasty fortifi-cations, and over the next few standard years there were several tragedies of the sort that on Earth were made notorious by Guyana and Waco, Texas. But then there’s no pleasing everybody.

There was a flurry of Doctorial microsurgery, in a surgery he opened up especially in the TARDIS; the modified troops had their implants removed and began to recover well, though they retained no memory of immediately prior events and had to be quite forcibly informed that they were not still at war. They were helped by therapy workshops run by Makar the Scout, who had cathartically recovered from his unfortunate nervous disorder by way of witnessing the destruction en masse of the monstrous creatures who had caused it.

The Emperor Sareth's hand had been found and kept safe on ice, and was microsutured back on. Sareth would bear the scar for the rest of his life because of Ravla's previous, cruder doctoring – but since the same crude doctoring had saved his life he considered it a fair exchange.

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It is worth mentioning at this point that Sareth's claim to the title of Emperor of the Saloi was immediately accepted by everybody – which led him to the depressing suspicion that everybody had always known except him.

The surviving Skrak, those who had been present at the final confrontation in the Summit, and the majority who had remained outside in the citadel, seemed disorganized and confused after the deaths of the their Mighty Leader and leader presumptive and the collapse of their Plan. They were herded into one of the structures of the citadel, placed under guard and left until someone could think what to do with them.

In the Summit itself, preparations were instigated for the betrothal ceremony that would cement this atmosphere of goodwill – and which, later commentators would aver, had been inevitable all along.

In a chamber simulating a self-enclosed jungle, in the quadrant of the Summit that had once been the demarcational public sector and was now just one quarter of a complex that was entirely public, the leaves rustled in a particularly thick area of alien vegetation, obscuring what mayor may not have been the forms of two people. The only conclusive evidence of who and what were there was their voices, and voices can mean anything.

'I suppose you'll be going, then,' said the first voice. 'Off with him again?

Away with him forever – is that the deal with those people? The Mephisto man. I just wish I knew what the deal was with him.'

'If you're saying what I think you're saying, then you can forget it,' said the second voice. 'It isn't like that. It's probably impossible for that matter.

Besides, he's old enough to be my great, great, great, great –'

'Let me know when you run out of greats. You'll have to tell me where

he gets his Cary Grant monkey-glands.'

'And while we're on the subject, don't think I haven't caught on to what's going on with her.'

'That's a lie! Um. Which one do you mean?'

'You know perfectly well which one I mean!'

'Well, it's a hard habit to break – not because there's anything going on, because there isn't. Nobody can change overnight. Does that hurt?'

'Yes. Oh, yes.'

'And that?'

'Yes – don't stop like that! If you stop like that again I'll kill you! Anyway, you ought to be ashamed of yourself; have you forgotten that they're doing it at this very moment as we speak?'

'Of course I hadn't forgotten,' the first voice said. 'I'm surprised you're not in the thick of it. You'd be in your element.'

'Oh, they asked. But it felt. . . *wrong*, somehow. I dunno.'

'What?' said the second voice.

'I can't explain it. I just really didn't want to do it and I couldn't think of a reason why I didn't. I don't know why.'

'Well that's interesting from a purely psychological viewpoint, of course. I mean, we all know why *I'm* not there, but I can't think of any. . . Oh. Oh damn! I mean it isn't because of –'

'I said I don't know why, okay? Sorry. Look, I'm really sorry. It's what we talked about. I don't want to go back. I can't. There's nothing for me back there. You know how it is. You don't know how hard it is. I. . . oh, sod it, let's just do it.'

'Bastard!' There was the sound of a slap, and sobbing.

Brokenly, broken up by sobbing, the second voice said: 'Bastard. You say and you – you do and then you come out and say –'

'Suit yourself then. Do whatever you like. I've had it.'

‘No you bloody haven’t!’ There was a sigh, and then the second voice muttered: ‘I just know I am really going to regret this.’ And then: ‘Okay. All right.

Let’s do it.’

In the oven-hot darkness of a structure built from scavenged junk, a crowd of Skrak sat listlessly, staring dispiritedly at their paws.

‘Uh,’ one of them said after a while. ‘What do we do now?’

‘Do?’ snorted another, who suddenly and for some reason seemed more alert and a lot more angry than the others. ‘We do what we always do – try to take over the *universe*!’

The betrothal ceremony had probably ended by now. Roz had avoided it by the simple expedient of staying in her room in the TARDIS with a good book. She had avoided it because she detected certain qualities within herself, certain emotional responses to other forms of life which she could recognize intellectually but couldn’t change – and she didn’t want them to spoil what was supposed to be a joyful occasion. Besides, she hadn’t been asked.

The book was *The All-Consuming Fire* by a ‘Dr John Watson’ in a limited, hand-printed edition she had found in the unkempt TARDIS library that seemed to go on forever. She had spent the time smiling at an incredibly naive and unworldly description of a woman who seemed to be Benny, and shaking her head in wonder at the thought that the great Sherlock Holmes, or a reasonable facsimile thereof, had really existed. She really hoped the book wasn’t some secondary result in the Doctor’s and Benny’s adventures in the Land of Fiction. She really hoped it was possible for her to meet the great detective sometime. She was sure they’d get on.

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Roz, to be honest, was feeling a little alone. Benny didn’t seem to be around at all, off with that man she had met – Roz never saw them but you could hear the arguments all over the place. The Doctor was of course the Doctor, and Chris was in his element, bumbling around with a bright-eyed smile and making friends with everybody. Even Wolsey the cat seemed to be avoiding her, when he usually and persistently tried to smother her, in the way that cats do to people who don’t like cats.

Then again, Wolsey seemed out of sorts with everybody, stalking

around and glaring and bristling if anyone came so much as near him. He seemed to have had a scare quite recently.

Time to get out, Roz, she thought, flinging her book away before she found out the solution, which she had already guessed, entirely wrongly as it happened. You're starting to worry about the bloody *cat*.

She left the TARDIS to find people of various species clearing away the last of the ceremonial debris. The Doctor and Chris were strolling through a sparse crowd of Dakhaari, Saloi and Czhans heading off in the direction of one of the doors. They looked round as she emerged and gestured her over with friendly smiles.

She joined them feeling absurdly grateful – she'd had the flash of irrational fear that they might coldly snub her. That's the problem with spending too much time on your own, she thought. It makes you paranoid.

'Hi,' she said. She turned to Chris. 'Enjoying you cultural studies?'

Chris blushed to the ears. 'It really wasn't like that,' he said. 'It was very solemn. Very beautiful. It's what they do. I mean, I've mentioned some of the things we do – human beings, I mean – to people and they were half horrified and half fascinated.'

'I rather fear,' the Doctor said with an evil little grin, 'that in years to come Chris will be responsible for a small cult notorious for what they think of as lewd and obscene practices.'

Chris Cwej blushed to his ears again.

'So where are the happy triple?' Roz asked.

'In their private apartments,' said the Doctor. 'Pressing affairs of state. . . '

'Oh yes?' Roz raised an eyebrow.

'. . . and I think that's exactly what they mean. As Chris said, they do things differently over here and this is primarily a *political* marriage – whatever at-tendant secondary comforts it might offer.'

As they reached the ruined doors a flustered Dakhaar in a military uniform bumped into them. He had an immediately recent olive-green eye.

‘Help! Help!’ he cried. ‘The Skrak have overpowered their guards, stolen a ship and escaped!’

‘Here we go again,’ said Roz.

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‘I think we’d better let them get on with it,’ said the Doctor seemingly un-perturbed. ‘For the moment. Help unasked for is seldom welcome.’

‘What is this?’ Roz said. ‘Aphorisms-R-Us?’

They walked through the corridors of the formerly public quadrant, eventually coming to a chamber of artificial jungle environment.

‘It’s peaceful, isn’t it?’ said Roz, listening to the rustling and the distant sound of waterfalls. ‘Considering.’

At that point two figures emerged from the vegetation, rearranging their clothing, and indeed each other’s, laughing together. Then they suddenly realized that they were not alone.

‘Benny!’ The Doctor bounded over to them. ‘I’ve been missing you. I really have.’

He turned to the other figure and pumped him warmly by the hand, oblivious of the fact that he was radiating embarrassment. ‘And the young man who took such good care of her! We seemed to have continually persisted in missing each other, what with the confusion. I’m so glad we finally have a chance to talk.’

‘Uh, Doctor,’ Benny said. ‘This is Jason. My fiance. He’s just proposed and I’ve accepted.’ A look of sheer and utter panic flashed across her face. ‘ *Please* don’t kill him.’

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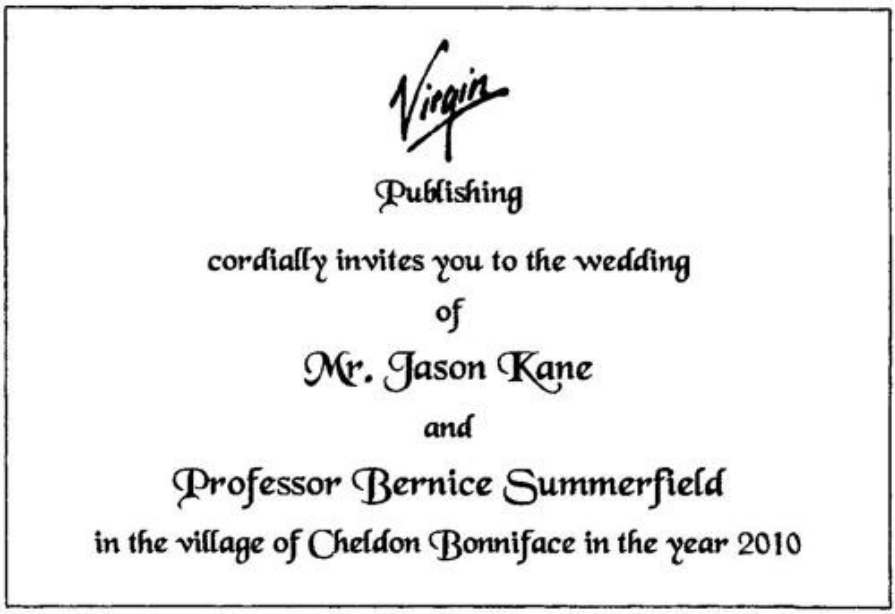
The 50th New Adventure
and
The Wedding of the Twenty-First Century



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